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He dared the Dark Land
to bring Mankind rebirth

MAN OF TWO WORLDS

(Original title: RENAISSANCE)

The Famous Science-Fiction Novel by
RAYMOND F. JONES



"Run For Your Lives! The Beam Is Coming This Way!"

Elta stood dazed as she watched the slow melting away of the mighty terraces before her. The beam cut through the metal wall of the Selector in a long white gash. Hundreds of glass and metal tubes collapsed. Some exploded in a rumble of thunder that further shattered the circuits as their gases were released and turned into isotopes.

They Were Upon Her . . .

a score of cruel Statists who seized her arms in a crippling grip and tore the weapon from her hands. They hurried her out the side of the building and into the electronic chamber.

"Leave Us Alone,"

spoke an unseen voice. Elta chilled at the sound. She knew that she had been taken to the sanctum of the Director, that in the huge tube before her was the crippled ageless *thing*, half-man, half-machine that should have been destroyed ages ago.

And Now She Was In Its Power!

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MAN OF TWO WORLDS

1

THE FIRST GLOBE HAD SET, AND THE LENGTHENING SHADOWS cast by the second sun were darkening the great hall of the *Karildex.*

The mighty machine seemed crouched down in the half darkness, like some mammoth creature settling for the night. The purple sheen of its thousand metallic facets reflected the glowing firebursts that lit the sky from Fire Land.

Only one position of the machine was occupied. It was being used by an inconspicuous, middle-aged man who punched one key after another in laborious indecision.

Twice, Ketan had offered to help him, and each time had been shrugged away. Would the fool never leave?

Ketan glanced at the other end of the hall where a single immobile figure was outlined against the twilight streaming through the broad, colored window.

Branen had been patient, but Ketan was anxious to carry out the purpose of their meeting. He sat down at his technician's position and turned to the filing of some of the day's new matrices.

These were the square perforated transparencies by which the master integration of the *Karildex* was formed. Each citizen of Kronweld, if he so chose, had the right to keep on file a matrix which integrated his characteristics, desires, wants, wishes, and passions with the thousands of others in the city.

The complete integration of the factors on the thousands of matrices formed an integrated will—the will, the law of Kronweld. The result could be read on the indicators and charts as if the entire city were a single individual.

The *Karildex* was thus the law and the government, requiring only administration. Any citizen desiring to know the concurrency of a contemplated act simply prepared a prospective integration on the keyboard and took an indication of congruency with the standard will of Kronweld. Lawbreaking was obviated before it could be initiated.

This was what the lone inquirer of the *Karildex* was doing

as Ketan chafed at his technician's position, irritably filing the revised matrices which had been submitted that day.

After three mistakes he gave up. He stood watching at the side of the towering machine, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He ran his lean, strong fingers through his black locks and thought of Elta whom he must meet within a short time —and of Daran. His lean jaw set hard as he thought of the coming encounter with the great Teacher.

Abruptly, the position light at the distant keyboard snapped out. The intruding presence of the trifling inquirer disappeared slowly through the broad doors of the building. Only the glow of dim night lamps far up against the ceiling and low green lamps outlining the *Karildex* remained to illumine the hall. The suns had set, leaving the purple, weaving glow from Fire Land to dominate the sky.

Ketan whipped into action. The figure at the other end of the hall approached. Ketan hurried to meet him.

"What did you find out, Branen?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing. I set keys all day until the tips of my fingers are worn down. Anything involving the question of the Temple of Birth has an index of above a hundred. Absolutely forbidden. The index is rising constantly. I'll bet those new matrices you filed today put it up another tenth of a point. It's hopeless to try to oppose it."

"I know the index," Ketan snapped impatiently. "But it's not hopeless. We're going to carry it through. Come here, and let me show you why I asked you to come."

He led the way quickly past the machine into a half hidden alcove. There lay the master control board to which only members of the First Group had access. Its multiple tiers of keys in semicircular banks rose to the limit of a long arm reach. At the top of the banked keys the indicator faces arced over in a ceiling formation that made a shell-like inclosure of the intricate keyboard. Only after long *tara* of experience did a man become proficient in its use.

Branen uttered a gasp as Ketan led him forward. "You've broken the seal on the master control board!"

"Never mind. Come here and look," Ketan urged. He sat before the ten thousand keys of the position and began manipulating an intricate formation.

"I did all that this afternoon," Branen observed impatiently. "The index—"

"The index is a hundred and ninety. That indicates that investigation into the origin of human life is absolutely forbidden. Now let's try this one."

Ketan reset the keys. "There's merely the question of life itself. The index is the same. That shows that the integration of life makes no distinction between life and human life. The factor is identical. Now watch when we change the factor to plants and animals."

Breathlessly, Branen watched. This was a line of reasoning that he had not followed. He waited for the index to appear on the indicator.

"Ninety," he breathed, "why, that—"

"Remember, now, we still have the factor of the Temple of Birth present in the master integration. Now, suppose we remove it."

"You can't. That's an impossibility."

"What do you think this master control board is for? Why do you suppose the First Group keeps it sealed?"

"But you will destroy the integration. The factor strengths are on record. When it is discovered that they have been changed—"

"They'll not change. I am setting up a separate memory circuit which holds all factors controlled by the concept of the Temple of Birth in abeyance. Read your index!"

One by one, Branen read them off as Ketan set up the factors minus the concept of the Temple of Birth. "Twenty-five, sixteen, nine!" he exclaimed. "We could investigate."

"*If* this integration represented the actual status of things," Ketan said. He reset the disturbed factors and returned the keyboard to normal. He replaced its intricate seal so that his intrusion would never be known. Then he led Branen away, back to the main hall.

"I asked you here tonight," Ketan said slowly, "to show you this, and to instruct you to take my place with the Unregistereds—if anything happens to me."

"Why should anything happen to you? You aren't—?" Branen began.

"I think the time has come to test our strength. Unless we make some positive forward move quickly the Unregistereds will die out and our purpose be lost."

"But you are the only one that is impatient," Branen protested. "The other members of the Unregistereds are content to wait until the situation becomes more promising."

"Becomes more promising! It will never become more promising until we make it so!" Ketan's first smashed down against a position panel on the *Karildex*. His eyes shifted

their focus and stared off into the far distance where darkness hid the other end of the machine.

"Imagine it," he murmured, "superstition, false knowledge, mental degeneracy—becoming so great that nine-tenths of the problems we would investigate now are forbidden to us because the people of Kronweld believe they are reserved for the God. Those of us who refuse to register our Seeking with the Seekers Council must work in darkness in secret shops and hide as if we were declassed."

"We would be—if we were discovered."

Ketan whirled upon his companion impatiently. "Branen, this is what I am trying to say: The time has come for the Unregistereds to come out of their holes, their hidden laboratories, and assert their rights to Seek into any Mystery whose existence is obvious—the Mystery of the Temple of Birth, the Mystery of the great Edge, the Mystery of Fire Land. These things should not be closed to us. We should not have to go and make application to a bunch of whiskery old men and desiccated old women in order to Seek into a Mystery. The only right they have to restrict our Seeking is based upon false integrations of the *Karildex*.

"That means the time has come to eradicate those false integrations. The time has come to bare to all Kronweld the work that we have been doing."

"We wouldn't dare!" Branen gasped.

"No—*we* wouldn't dare," Ketan said bitterly. "*We* wouldn't —meaning most of the Unregistereds. But *I* would. I'm going to take the chance. I'm going to tell the Seekers Council—at a public hearing—that I've found the secret of the creation of life."

"They'll declass you!"

"Let them—if they dare, after what I have to show them."

Branen gazed in silent admiration upon the tall, rangey form of his leader. He gazed into the snapping eyes and the long, lean jaw that clenched firm, admitting of no uncertitude, once a course of action had been set.

He shook his head sadly. "I could never take your place. You are so *sure*. You seem to know without a doubt where you're going. You say that five hundred *tara* of tradition in Kronweld can be overthrown in a day and state it as easily as if you were going to order a meal from a panel. I must be honest with you. Not one of the Unregistereds believes you can succeed in your defiance of the ways of Kronweld—though you almost convince me."

"And that is why you are the only one to whom I can offer

my place in case something happens to me. There is danger enough. I am not minimizing it. I know it's tampering with the most explosive force in Kronweld to attack the Temple of Birth. But it must be destroyed. Every shred of its influence must be wiped out of our lives. Unless it's done our civilization is doomed. I'm going to make a start. If I fail, you will carry on the work of the Unregistereds—until the situation becomes more promising. You agree?"

"I'll do it," Branen whispered solemnly. "I'll do it." Then "What is your plan?" he asked.

"Teacher Daran has asked me to come to see him tonight. I'll provoke him into ordering a reprimand for me. That will provide an opportunity for a full public hearing which I shall demand."

"It won't be hard to provoke Teacher Daran. He's been on the verge of ordering your reprimand almost from the first time he saw you."

"I know. If I fail, you will find all my notes and materials in my hidden laboratory beneath the house. You know where they are. Take them and use them. Carry the work on from there. That is all."

A momentary uncertainty crossed Branen's face and then he turned and was gone.

2

KETAN MOVED TOWARDS THE LIGHTS AND DOOR CONTROLS. He walked in weariness after the tension of coming to a decision was over. He felt as if he were flowing on the breast of a river of destiny. Nothing could turn him aside, now.

He was glad the day was over. He never knew how long a day might be, because the machine was at the service of the people of Kronweld as long as there were any who still desired to use it. As senior technician, it was Ketan's duty to remain until the last inquirer had been satisfied.

But there would be no more tonight. He flicked off the light and hurried along towards the dimly luminous panel of the door. The great machine with its store of the mind and feelings of Kronweld lay silent and asleep like a great living beast.

Ketan knew he was already late for his appointment with

Elta. She would be angry and her eyes, like the tips of hot, blue flames would be scathing—for a short time. It was hard for either of them to hold the peak of anger long between them before they found themselves laughing at their baseless arguments.

As he stepped out, the cool night wind brushed his face in relaxing freshness. His heartbeat increased and the day's weariness began to pass with the thought of Elta.

It was then that he saw the old woman.

She was alone, hobbling along the walk that led from the distant street to the steps of the hall of the *Karildex*. As she shuffled forward, Ketan stood entranced by the wave of near hypnotic attention the withered figure demanded.

She was like the dried leaves that scurried across the lawn in front of the building. Her hair was awry and swaying like living tentacles in the night. And the black shawl, that was characteristic of the old when their bodies became too ill-formed for the revealing harness of ordinary wear, was like a shroud about her.

She croaked a single word at him and pointed a gnarled finger. "Wait!"

It was no request. It was a command.

"The building has just been closed for the night. It is too late to make any inquiry tonight." Ketan's voice carried little conviction.

"Don't tell me any of that! I know the regulations governing the use of the *Karildex*. Admit me."

She was within her rights. Ketan swore softly and pressed the combination release that swung open the great, wide doors again. "There would be much more time tomorrow," he suggested.

"Not for me . . . not for me," the old woman whispered. "Here, help me up these steps."

He took her hand and it was like lifting the hollow branch of a rotted tree. It was so light. He knew there was prophecy in her words. There was not much time for her—not much time at all. It drew out a quality of pity in him, for the tragedy of age and death were the supreme of all tragedies to Ketan.

"What is it you would inquire?" he asked, anxious to atone somewhat for his initial brusqueness, and to be free as soon as possible. "Perhaps I could help you at the keyboard."

"None of your business," she snapped. "It's my own affair."

Her reply turned his sympathy cold and he left her inside the door and returned disgruntled to his technician's position. He did not even turn on his position light but sat in the

darkness, watching the distant gleam that hung over the thin, withered shoulders of the old woman who hunched over the keyboard.

He wondered what she wanted. Why had she come alone in the night, hobbling to the reservoir of desires and will of all Kronweld? What possible difference could it make to her or to Kronweld what choice the shriveled creature made in *any* question that was before her?

Ketan's attention was dragged almost against his will to concentrate on her. For a moment he couldn't tell what drew him. Then he realized: It was the swift click of flashing keys. Ordinarily, the average inquirer punched slowly, one at a time, squinting up at the graphs and dials each time to laboriously interpret the results offered him.

But the old woman was playing upon the keyboard with the touch and speed of a master technician. Only one man had Ketan ever seen who could perform like that at the keyboards. He wondered if she were just madly punching keys or if she were really pursuing a logical inquiry.

At that instant her dry, cracked voice echoed through the dead and silent hall.

"Ketan!"

He started.

Then, more softly, it came again, almost caressingly. "Ketan."

It sent a chill along the back of his neck—the strange tone of her voice. How had she known his name? Had she deliberately sought it from the *Karildex*?

She moved away from the position and came towards him in the darkness. He had a feeling that she could see him.

He turned on the light at his position. "Have you finished?"

"I have only begun," she said waveringly. "I must have the master control board."

"The ma—! That's impossible. Only the First Group and the Council of Seekers have entry to the master keyboard. That is not for general use."

"You have used it tonight," she said. "You altered the setting of the master integration with respect to the Temple of Birth and the Edge. You thought you returned it to the original factors. Perhaps no one else would ever have detected it, but I have detected it. You would not like the master technician to know that, would you?"

Beads of perspiration stood out upon Ketan's forehead. *Who* was this insidious old woman? His sympathy for her began to turn to fear and hate. He could not afford any in-

volvement over his use of the *Karildex* now that his decision with regard to his presentation before the Seekers Council had been made.

"What do you want?" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Who are you?"

"You have thought to save Kronweld from herself, the slow dying senility she is passing through—like me. That is good. But the enemy you see is pitiful—a trifling matter—compared with the actual enemy that besets Kronweld, of which you know nothing. *Give me that keyboard!*"

"You have no right to it."

"I must have it." Her tone was deadly as if she had power to blast him out of existence if he refused her demand.

"Someone might come—"

"No one will come. No one ever comes this late at night. Give me that keyboard."

The old woman approached him like the menace of death itself. Her green, glowing eyes reflected the position light with an intensity that stabbed through him.

He turned like a machine and went towards the sealed chamber of the master keyboard. His fingers pressed the forbidden combination that he was not supposed to know, and the gate swung open.

"Ah—that is good," the old woman whispered.

Ketan cursed himself for an ineffectual fool. How had she ever determined that he had altered the factor settings of the master integration? The memory circuits were supposed to be perfect. He knew he had returned the integration to normal. It was impossible to detect the tampering. Yet she *had* detected it.

But now the soft click of keys hummed under her fingers. So swiftly did her hands move that the distinct click of each key was no longer distinguishable, but the sounds blended into each other in a steady flow of monotonous sound that was broken only when she pressed the indicator lever and called for an index.

Ketan stared, fascinated and helpless. He saw after many moments of intense study that she had reassembled the master integration in almost unrecognizable form. He prayed silently that she had retained all the disturbed factors in the memory circuits so that the *Karildex* might be returned to normal. If she failed to do so, there would be chaos—not only for Ketan, but for all Kronweld.

Abruptly, the chanting music of the keys ceased, and the old women turned to him. "You are the only one," she mur-

mured. "There can be no other." And suddenly her eyes were piercing his. She stared at him with a quick, mute pleading as if she would bare her entire soul to him, and tears started in her eyes.

"What do you—?" he began.

She turned back quickly. Her eyes were staring into space. "Three people must die," she said, hardly whispering the words. "Three must die."

3

HER FINGERS SET THEMSELVES TO THE KEYS AGAIN AND MOVED faster than sight could follow. Then she pressed an indicator key. An index appeared on the panel. Ketan stared at it. With a shock of premonition he recognized Leader Hoult, Head of the Seekers Council. It was he, along with the twenty other Councilors, before whom he would appear with the evidence of the forbidden knowledge he would reveal to all Kronweld.

"Look at the indications of his factors," the old woman commanded.

Ketan looked. There, revealed, were the factors and concepts that Leader Hoult had submitted to be integrated into the mass will of Kronweld. There were the desires and wants and impulses that he had gained through the experiences of his life and made him the man he was. Ketan gave them a cursory glance.

"What about them?"

"Look closely. Watch these that I intensify. Tell me what they are."

Each factor as it was picked from the general graph and intensified was indicated by a code figure on a dial. By long experience, Ketan believed there was no factor code that he could not recognize and identify on sight.

His mind went spinning over the catalogue of infinitely complex combinations that he knew. The number before him was totally unfamiliar. Its strangeness appalled him. A sense of cold foreboding stole along his spine.

"I can't be expected to remember them all," he said.

"Look it up."

He turned to the manual index on the wall and pressed the

tabs that corresponded to the index of the unfamiliar factors. The proper defining sheet should have slid out.

There was only a blank.

"You see?" the old woman exclaimed. There was a horrible gloating in her voice. "Now this one."

Another unfamiliar number appeared. The index for that, too, was blank.

"What does it mean? How did you know about this?" Ketan asked in a thin voice edged with terror. "It can have no meaning. There must be an error in the machine."

"An error in the *Karildex*?" The woman laughed harshly. "How many times have you boasted of its accuracy? No—there is no error. Now watch this one."

Another, totally different index flashed before them. Ketan recognized it as taken from the matrix of Teacher Daran, the foremost mathematician of the House of Wisdom. Ketan stared at the row of factor indexes. Out of the hundreds, there were three that registered blank.

"You see—as hard as they tried to keep them out of their matrices, they failed to do so when the proper influences are subtracted. Look at their matrices."

She made another manipulation and drew from a slot two transparent squares. The surfaces were covered with hundreds of tiny perforations. The woman placed it over a printed sheet and held a magnifying glass over the whole.

"It is perfectly normal to all appearances."

"But what does it *mean*?" Ketan whispered, more to himself than to the old woman.

She answered him. "It means that here are persons within our midst who have had experiences that do not conform to any possible experience available in Kronweld—or in Dark Land or Fire Land, either, for they have been catalogued.

"Can you understand that? No—you cannot. I will tell you. It means they have come from outside!" she seemed to shriek the final word.

"Outside? What is outside?"

"It is beyond . . . beyond the limits of Kronweld. In the world where no man of Kronweld has ever penetrated. Can you not conceive of that? Have you not dreamed of a place of sand and desert and winds and a lone, silent rock that stands like a monument in the desert?"

Her voice had dropped to a low insinuation that penetrated Ketan's mind like a thin knife blade. He trembled and backed away from her, white-faced.

"How do you know of that?"

"You are Ketan," she said simply. "I know many things about you."

"How do you know anything about me? Who are you?"

She ignored his questions—and his hands that had seized the thin sticks of her shoulders.

"There is one more index you must see," she said. She shook off his gripping hands and pressed a series of keys in swift order—but the name was left off. The index appeared. He saw a dozen alien, unknown factors in that series, and checked them. Blanks, all.

"Whose is that one?"

She pressed a final key. The identification factor appeared. He uttered a single, sobbing cry.

"Elta!"

The master control board had been set to cancel out the factors of the Temple of Birth, the Edge, the date of the beginning of Kronweld's history, and a half dozen other factors for which Ketan saw no purpose in canceling.

It was in the absence of these factors that the unknown factors on the matrices of the three persons became evident. No one would have discovered them in a thousand *tara* unless he knew exactly what he was looking for.

The old woman had known.

But Elta!

Ketan's mind shut itself against the significance of her unknown factors. There was nothing uncommon about Elta—except for loveliness, the wonder and beauty of her, the supremacy of her Seeking.

The old woman had said there were three who must die.

"Tell me what this means," he demanded.

She hesitated while her agile fingers began the resetting of the master control board.

"It was a miracle finding you here—to be able to show you these. It was more than I dreamed, to find you right here in the hall of the *Karildex*."

She turned and looked upon him with her old, still-bright eyes. "You wonder who I am? I shall tell you. But there are many things you must know first.

"I warn you that danger and death lies over Kronweld. Already its arm is raised for the final blow to destroy this world. These three are agents of this destruction. There are others, but these are the most important.

"You think me mad? Wait until I am finished. But these three must die. That will be your task. Slay these three!"

His mind spun. He shook his head as if to clear it. He tried to figure out why he was standing here listening to this mad, old woman when he should be calling for a Serviceman to take her away. Plotting death for two of the foremost Seekers in Kronweld—and Elta.

"You are insane—I'll hear no more. You shall tell the rest of your story to the First Group."

"Sit down!"

It was not a mere verbal command. It became a hypnotic leash that reached out and gripped his mind, forced his muscles to hold him fast to the seat before the keyboard.

Against his will, he remained and listened.

"For more than a hundred *tara* an organization has existed in our midst and none have guessed its existence. The final objective of that organization is the destruction of Kronweld. They fear us and they will destroy us. They are the Statists.

"They have withheld the death blow only awaiting the proper time. This organization has used us, used our Seeking; it has drained Kronweld of the secrets of its Seeking and used them against us. Only one more are they waiting for and then their knowledge will satisfy them and Kronweld shall die. That is an understanding of our use of atomic forces."

"You're utterly mad," Ketan said in a low voice. "Do you expect me to sit here and believe such a fantastic lie?"

"What of the factors you could not identify?"

"There'll be a natural explanation of them and I'll find it right here in the *Karildex*. Who would compose such a group? What would be the purpose behind them?"

"I'll tell you who they are, because you alone out of all Kronweld could understand, for you have seen their world. The world of colored sands and the thin pinnacle of rocks, standing like a monument in the desert. They are—"

There was a sudden sharp sound from the door of the hall. It was out of their line of sight. The old woman instantly extinguished the light and slipped away from the keyboard.

In the darkness Ketan heard her hoarse, dismayed exclamation. "Hoult!"

Then she was gone. Ketan hurriedly shut up the master keyboard in the secret panels and slipped away to the other side of the *Karildex*. There, he pressed the button on a position light which was not visible from the door. He set up a sequence and pretended to be studying as footsteps grew nearer in the vast echoing hollowness of the hall.

"Technician!"

The voice rang out sharply.

"Respect to you, sir," Ketan called. His heart was thudding within him. "I am here."

He hurried around the end of the machine towards the leader. Why had the man come, he wondered. He sensed an impending disaster to his plans before they ever began to be put into operation. He didn't want to meet this man now.

He came face to face with him at the end of the monstrous machine.

"Technician!"

"Wisdom, sir."

"I was passing and saw the door open, but no lights. It seemed strange that there would still be inquiries this time of night." Hoult's black eyes looked down from a height that made Ketan look up into them.

"No one was here, sir. I was working on a little problem of my own. I was just getting ready to leave."

"That is good. I commend you for your studiousness."

But Hoult's thoughts were not upon his words. Ketan watched his shining, ebon eyes send a darting glance into the black reaches of the hall. Surely he couldn't *know*.

"There have been reports in the city," Hoult said as if it were an idle afterthought, "of an old, insane woman, who escaped from confinement. She has not, by any chance, been near the *Karildex* today?"

Ketan shook his head without hesitation. "No. I have seen no very old persons at all today. They seldom come here. The *Karildex* makes little difference to them. They live their lives without offense or friction."

"Yes . . . well—" Hoult agreed idly with this bit of philosophy while his eyes still pierced the dark shadows beneath the looming machine. "Report at once if you see any such. Wisdom to you, Technician."

"Wisdom, Leader."

The man vanished slowly in the shadows and Ketan stood staring after him. Why hadn't he told the Leader that the mad old woman was here now, hiding in the darkness of the great hall? Was it only that she had threatened to expose his use of the master control board?

She would have a hard time convincing them of that—if they thought she was insane. She could not prove her accusations.

But there was something more that held him back. There were the unexplainable factor indexes, the fact that she knew of his visions of the red desert with the pinnacle—how had she known such a thing—and more: there was something that

reached out from that withered husk in intangible and unspoken communication and found a chord of sympathy in his being. He wanted to know who she was. He *must* know.

He turned back into the shadows where he had seen her disappear. He cautiously turned on a single light that dimly illumined the section of the hall.

But she was not there. She must have slipped around the other end of the machine. He raced down the length of a hundred positions and came to the end. Another light failed to reveal her presence anywhere.

Then he saw her.

A distant, dim shadow flitted out from the looming hulk of the machine at the far end. She ran with incredible speed towards the door and vanished into the night.

He raced after her, silently, not daring to call out. At the door he hesitated, the night breeze splashing over his face. But there was no sign of any moving object—only a pair of strolling companions on the far side of the road that passed in front of the building.

No sign of any fleeing woman—an old and withered husk running through the night.

It was useless to attempt to follow her.

She would come again, he knew.

4

HE CLOSED THE DOOR OF THE GREAT BUILDING FOR A FINAL time that night and made his way slowly out towards the road. It was late. He wondered if both Elta and Teacher Daran would have given him up. Still, it was not that late. Much of Kronweld's life did not sleep until just before the rising of the first globe.

Thoughtlessly, he had taken his day cloak and now he flung it about him. The heavy, leaded cloth felt good, cutting out the night wind. Though the air was warm, an unaccountable chill stole over him.

After a few hundred steps he identified its source. It centered in the fact of the curious coincidence that on this night he would have met all three of those accused by the old woman of plotting against Kronweld.

He puzzled over Leader Hoult's concern about the woman. Though he had tried to appear calm, it was obvious that he was highly agitated over her. It was too fantastic to believe there could be any truth to the old woman's story.

Ketan tried to shrug away the puzzle, the mystery of it, and the unreasonableness. Almost, it had made him forget the tremendous step he was about to take in proclaiming his discovery of the means of creation of life to Kronweld.

He hurried through the night as if trying to flee from the haunting memory of the old woman's face looming up before him like a dead and shriveled fruit.

He turned into the roadway that led north. A *stetor* distant was the blank curtain of the great Edge.

Never, since he first emerged from the Temple of Birth, had he looked upon that sheet of blackness without experiencing the swift thrill of the unknown that now swept through him, leaving a faint chill in its wake. At times the mere contemplation of the thing left him trembling and weak.

When he had been younger he had often contemplated the possibility of building a rising machine, one that would carry a man high enough to reach the top of the great Edge. He knew that the energies of atomic engines were more than enough to make such a machine possible.

But he knew now that such a dream was a childish fantasy. Nothing could ever go beyond the edge of the Edge. It was nothing, a vast wall of negative existence that stretched from positive to negative infinity. Top, sides, expanse, depth—all were terms that had no meaning when applied to the great Edge.

An almost physical pain of yearning and desire for knowledge passed through him when he thought of the vast mystery here, a Mystery that no one among the Seekers of Kronweld would recognize—except the Unregistereds. A Mystery, therefore, that had to be examined illegally.

As he walked, staring into the blackness of the Edge, he thought of Elta. What would she say when he told her he must go to see Teacher Daran? More: what would she say when he told her of his decision? He knew. Somehow—he would have to change her mind about it—

There was a sudden tingling at the roots of his brain. It ate along the nerve channels of his body and turned his quick steps into slow, erratic ploddings.

Before him the infinite curtain of blackness began to lose its empty nothingness. A reddish tinge began to touch the black and Ketan cried out involuntarily.

It was coming again.

Wind began to whip about his head. Sharp daggers of sand, borne aloft on its breath, stabbed even through the heavy day cloak. The reddish sky was brightening and the world became a howling madness of driving sheets of sand and wind.

Kronweld became as if it had never existed.

He was in the midst of a desert, a red, howling desert where life was inconceivable. From horizon to horizon there was nothing—only the bleak vastness of sand and sky and wind.

Except for a single sliver of rock that broke the bare line between sand and sky, curiously visible as if the driving sheets of sand were transparent.

The pinnacle seemed closer this time. Each time it seemed closer. His feet slogged through the powdery, resistant sand until his muscles ached and cried out for relief. But something insistent would not let him rest. He had to drive on and on, whipped and torn by the ceaseless winds. Perhaps this time he would reach the pinnacle—

Then something stopped him like a thudding blow within his skull. He heard the distant sound as of a human voice, soaring all the way across the reaches of that endless desert, distant—as if it came from the far away pinnacle itself.

"Hasten, Lonely One—your time is short. You must not fail . . . you must not fail . . . come—"

The voice trailed off to inaudibility, and the wind soared in a howling frenzy of madness as if to drive the sound waves back to their very origin and prevent the words from ever having been uttered.

Abruptly, all was gone.

Ketan found himself at a distance from the last place he remembered walking as the vision came. The same distance apparently that he had trudged over the drifting desert sands.

He was dripping with cold sweat that formed in his pores. The sound of that alien, haunting voice still rang in his ears, as if it were the final call of a dying world, and he, somehow, had the strange, unknown power to be its savior.

He shook off the maddening vision, but his being cried out for relief from it. Sixteen times now he had experienced it since emerging from the Temple of Birth. This last time was by far the worst. Never before had he heard that voice, never had the winds beat so fearfully.

Never had he told anyone of these experiences.

But the mad old woman who had come to the *Karildex* had known of them. How was it possible?

When would it end? What did it mean?

When he saw Elta sitting among the trees of the small parkway that divided the road he forgot the horrors of his vision. He stood and watched her a moment before she saw him.

Her slim brown body was dark under the violet sky glow that rippled fitfully above them. She was clad only in the universal fashion of brief, white harness that served necessary convenience and protection. Her small, golden head was moving anxiously from side to side, trying to find him somewhere in the darkness.

Music was coming faintly from the outlets of Artist Center hidden among the trees.

He stepped up behind her. "Waiting for someone?"

"Ketan!"

She whirled, startled. "Have I waited? A dozen times I decided to go and then to stay just another while. What kept you so long? Inquirers?"

"Yes—they don't often come this late. But I had some rather distinguished company tonight."

He paused. He wondered if he should go on. All the way from the *Karildex* he had determined to ignore the strange factors he had seen in her graphs, to let it make no difference between them. Now, as he sat down beside her, there was a barrier that the loveliness of her presence, her tender possessing glance would not put down.

"Leader Hoult was in to see me."

"Leader Hoult! What did he want?"

"He was looking—he said—for a little old lady whom he thought he might find inquiring at the *Karildex*."

Ketan paused. Had Elta's face blanched a trifle—her lips shown a momentary unsteadiness? He couldn't tell for sure in the accursed light from the sky.

"A little old woman? Why was he looking for her? Who was she?" Elta's voice betrayed no emotion.

"He said she was insane and had escaped from confinement. The Servicemen were looking for her—and Leader Hoult wanted her found with dead certainty."

"How do you know? Did he say so?"

"He merely mentioned her. His concern was so obvious that I think he dared not stay longer because of it."

"Queer—" she laughed, "the things you observe, tending the *Karildex*. Tell me what else happened today." She drew

closer and settled against his shoulder. "It's been so long since I saw you."

"Since yesterday, isn't it?" he smiled. "But I can't stay here. You remember I said Teacher Daran wanted to see me soon?"

She nodded, dismayed. "And you have to see him tonight?"

"How did you guess?"

"I can foretell things like that. I'll be so glad when you become a full Seeker—and we can make our companionship."

He clutched her hand tightly, though his veins were ice within him.

"Anyway, we can be together a whole day, the day after tomorrow. The *Karildex* will not be open," she reminded him.

"Of course it will! Why shouldn't it be?"

"It's the opening of the Temple of Birth. Had you forgotten?"

"Yes—I had forgotten." His voice was thin. The reminder drove his mind back to the unyielding purpose of his existence—to bare the treachery and fraud of that unholy place.

His mind completed the circle of its problems and came back to Elta. She was looking up at him in the silent, confident glance that bound them tighter than chains and made a great thankfulness well up within him.

And he cursed himself for the things that he was about to say.

"Elta—today I accidentally introduced your matrix into a problem I was working on. Some strange results appeared. I found three factor indexes which are not recognizable by any description in the standard catalogue. It has bothered me a great deal. Do you know what it means or how they got into your matrix?"

Ketan was not conscious of it at first, but gradually he became aware that Elta had become as stone beside him. Every muscle had drawn to the limit of its tautness. She was trembling faintly as if with cold, and her eyes were not upon him, but were staring far beyond him.

When her voice spoke it was like the soft tinkling of ice. "You didn't find those factors by yourself, did you? The little old woman showed you. So she has set herself against me at last—and you had to know it, too—"

"Elta, what are you talking about? Do you know who she is?"

"She showed you, didn't she?"

"Yes—"

Ketan couldn't go on. There was suddenly nothing that he could say, nothing he wanted to say. He felt as if he had

touched upon something that would haunt him in dreams through the rest of his life, something horrible and unclean that was ensnaring him and Elta like a trap. If he went along and said nothing, it would die and pass out of existence, but to stir it up, attempt to fight it—

"I knew you would find it some day," she was saying dully. "I knew she could come. What did she say about me?"

"She said I must kill you—to save Kronweld."

Elta gave a quick gasp. Her voice was heavy with sorrow when she spoke. "How she must hate us. What others did she mention?"

Ketan ignored her question and burst out with the torment that was within him. "Elta! Tell me what this is all about. You talk as if you were in another world and I were nothing but a little actor on a tiny stage with my own insignificant world while you belong to an alien fearful world far beyond my experience. Tell me, Elta!"

"Tell me what your answer to Teacher Daran is going to be."

Her sudden change of subject irritated him. "That's not important—now. I want to know what all this about your unknown factors means."

"It's all part of the same problem. Tell me what your answer is going to be."

"I've got to know what he wants, first." This new track disconcerted him, gave him no time to build up to what he must say concerning his decision.

"Tell me what your answer is going to be. You know what his question is!"

"Well—if he asks me to enter the House of Wisdom and be entrained to take his place, I'll accept it, of course. Any learner Seeker would be glad to have such an honor."

"You don't mean that."

"Of course I do. Naturally, I'll ask for the same privileges all other Seekers in the house of Wisdom have—the right to pursue their own Seeking while there."

"Even if it is unregistered?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know you, Ketan. You'll not be content to work in darkness, in secrecy in your underground laboratory while inquisitive Servicemen snoop constantly for evidence of your lawbreaking. You are going to refuse Teacher Daran, aren't you?"

"Yes," he blazed suddenly, "and I'm going to do more than that. I'm going to demand a public hearing before the Seekers Council and tell them I know the secret of the creation of life.

I'll expose the deception of the Temple of Birth to all Kronweld.

"Day after tomorrow is the opening of the Temple," he added thoughtfully. "What better time could I have chosen?"

She was silent for so long that he turned and looked down upon her. She had slumped from her stone-rigid position and sat with eyes averted downward. Her hands were composed upon the warm, bronzed skin of her thighs.

"Elta—"

"Ketan, I want the first promise that I have ever asked of you. When the time comes—and it will come soon—when I can tell you what all this means, I promise that I will tell you fully. I promise, too, that I shall never do anything—I have never done anything—to harm Kronweld. The old woman didn't understand. She cannot know that my pain has been as great as hers. I promise that I shall clear up this mystery and you will know and understand that I have done right. I must go away for a little while. When I come back, we shall make our companionship. But you must not attempt to overthrow the Temple of Birth by declaring your discoveries to the Seekers Council. That is the promise I want of you. They'll declass you. You'll be unable ever to Seek again. I want your promise, Ketan."

"I can't give it. This is the thing I've dreamed of since the first time I was introduced to Seeking. I've known that this was my work. How can you ask such a thing of me, when you won't even explain the slightest fragments of the mystery about yourself? Why must you go away? Where is there to go that I cannot come with you, or follow you?"

"Then at least promise you'll postpone it until I can return to you and explain the things you want to know."

He shook his head. "I can't even do that. I've told the Unregistereds what I plan to do. No other time will be so appropriate as this once in a *tara* opening of the Temple. If I failed now, the Unregistereds would disintegrate and be exactly as they were when I began. I cannot wait!"

Elta had straightened to look into his eyes, but now her shoulders slumped again. Her lips moved impulsively, silently. At last she said, "You're a fool—a wonderful, idiotic genius of a fool. And I love you so. I wish often that I had never met you. I wonder how it will all end?"

"How would you want it to end?"

"How?" She looked up at him again and then away to the shimmering curtains of light in the sky. "Like we always dreamed it would end. You and I going away into Dark Land,

continuing our work there, proving you are right about the creation of life in absolute freedom. Oh, I know we're not free here. It irks and drags on me as much as it does on you. But we can't turn the whole of Kronweld upside down because we've discovered something there's no hope of making them believe. Let's go to Dark Land—some of the others will go with us. We can build a community and a life of our own, far away from all this."

"You'd die out there, and you know it. We aren't made to live like Bors. We're men and women. And we've a duty to Kronweld, a duty to Seeking."

"We could carry out that duty in Dark Land—"

"But not until we've tried here, first."

"I must go," he said abruptly. "Teacher Daran will not wait all night. I must see him. Will you go with me?"

5

ELTA REMAINED OUTSIDE THE GATE OPENING ON THE SHORT path that led to the garden. Ketan walked slowly along it, alone, clutching the thick day cloak tightly about him.

Teacher Daran was relaxing beside the fountain that spumed up in the midst of his garden. Brightly colored, phosphorescent muds spouted into the night air through an artificial orifice and fell back in a sluggish stream that flowed through a carefully channeled way and then sagged into the bosom of the earth again. A soft curtain of steamy mist floated over the garden towards the plain marble house where Teacher Daran lived alone. He had never taken a companion.

"Wisdom." Ketan approached through the curtain of mist.

Teacher Daran rose on one arm. He had thrown aside his day cloak and had been lying with eyes shut, enjoying music that Ketan knew was coming from Artist Center.

"Wisdom," Teacher Daran responded. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness and mist. "Is it you, Ketan? My eyes are weakening more each day. Come—you are wearing your cloak when it is nearly night?"

The old man chuckled. "What is it, Ketan? You come in the midst of the night with your day cloak and it is you who are always preaching that we are weaklings because we must

wear the cloak at all. You say we should go without protection as our predecessors did."

Ketan threw aside the heavy garment of lead strands.

"You asked me to come, Teacher," he said.

"Of course. It is simple," said Teacher Daran. "Recline."

Ketan dropped beside the old man. The Teacher's great body was lined with the marks of age, but it was still filled out with smooth rippled muscles of strength, and the massive chest rose and fell with long, regular rhythm.

"The Council of the House of Wisdom has appointed you to fill my place."

Ketan supported himself on one elbow gazing for a moment into the eyes buried deep beneath the overhanging crags of the man's forehead. He thought of the unknown factors in the matrix, and the old woman who had come to the *Karildex*.

"I would become a full Seeker, then?"

Teacher Daran smiled and nodded. "And you could make your companionship with Elta at once. You don't know how fortunate you are. Perhaps if I had found such a Seeker companion when I was young—"

"I would be accorded full rights of Seeking—the privilege of choosing my own Mysteries?"

"Subject only to the approval of rejection or the Council." The Teacher nodded.

"I do not recognize their right to pass upon the Mysteries I choose. Why should they have power to tell me that I may not choose the Mystery of the great Edge, of Fire Land—or even of the Temple of Birth itself?"

"So the things they whisper about you *are* true?"

"What is whispered about me?"

"In the Council of the House of Wisdom have come reports of an organization called the Unregistereds—who confine their Seeking to unregistered Mysteries. There are those in the Council who say you are one of those. Many times it has been talked of—the desirability of making a complaint to the First Group. Because of the excellence of your work with the *Karildex* I have been able to persuade them from taking such drastic action, and even to put through a vote for you to fill my place.

"I am warning you severely, Ketan, as a friend and as your Teacher, that you stand on very dangerous ground. How can you possibly say that you challenge the right of the Seekers Council to supervise Seeking when you are so expert in operation and knowledge of the *Karildex*? Surely you must

know that the Council's commission was a direct solution given out by the *Karildex* three hundred *tara* ago."

"And that is the very reason I challenge the restrictions! The integration of the *Karildex* is based upon false factors."

"How can that be? The integration is renewed twice every *tara* and may be supplemented any time a person so desires."

"The integration reflects only the knowledge of the individuals assembling it. If that knowledge is false, the integration is likewise in error."

"And just which factors do you claim to be false?" Teacher Daran spoke the words very evenly.

Ketan pressed his lips tightly. "You know the ones. I haven't been silent about them."

"Then it *is* true—what they say about you. I have been a fool to try to defend you before the Council of the House of Wisdom. It is true that you deny the sacred aspect of the Temple of Birth and advocate its removal from the category of sacred Mysteries. You believe it should be opened to the profane study of all Seekers in Kronweld?"

"Advocate? Believe? I demand it!"

"I shall make a complaint against you tonight. This time tomorrow will see you declassed."

Elta was waiting at the end of the path, her slender form silhouetted against the sky. She stretched out a hand as he approached.

"What did you tell him?" she asked anxiously.

Ketan told her briefly. "He is issuing a complaint at once. I must hurry to the house and get my materials ready. I shall ask for a hearing, a public hearing."

"Ketan—no! Please, for my sake. Go back and ask Teacher Daran to withdraw the complaint. He will accept your apology, I know. Tell him you will take the position offered."

"I shall ask for a hearing," Ketan said. "Kronweld must know the truth about the creation of life, and the Temple of Birth must be opened to Seekers."

"You fool, you unutterable idiot!" Elta hurled at him. Her flame-blue eyes flashed a reflection from the sky.

But Ketan had turned to the road. "I must hurry. I'll walk as far as you are going. Are you coming?"

They turned out from the private path to the main road whose green, glassy surface stretched away in a great circle which passed before the magnificent Temple of Birth in the near distance.

They walked along in silence, intent upon the sky re-

flections in the road surface. The road led out of the more luxurious section of the city where lived those entitled to luxury, the full Seekers, the members of the First Group, and the managers of production. Elta lived closer to the center of the city in a group house of Seekers.

Ketan lived on the other side with those entitled to less, the learner Seekers. And here it was that most of the population of ten thousand lived, for there were few full Seekers. Nearly all Mysteries had been solved. Man had reached a point near the apex of his available knowledge. The unavailable knowledge—the sacred Mysteries—constituted those things that were not meant for man to know.

The city was laid out in a great circle that stretched before the pair as they walked in the darkness. It was bounded on one side by the volcanic, radioactive Land of Fire that lit the entire sky with its blaze of violet and crimson lights. Beyond it lay the eternal wastes of Dark Land with its perpetual pall of clouds and fog of smoke and ashes that were carried by the fierce winds that spewed out of Fire Land.

Ketan and Elta came out of the overhanging garden growth that lined the roadway into an open space. There they paused as Ketan looked up. He gazed at the other boundary of Kronweld—the Edge.

No words of description could convey the appearance of the thing. It was simply nothing. A vast, unknowable curtain of nothing, a terrifying blackness that stretched between the impassable horns of Fire Land that met it at either end of the encircling arc encompassing Kronweld. And stretched to infinity above.

It was the Edge.

"Can't you feel it?" whispered Ketan. "Haven't you ever known a longing, a yearning rising up within you, telling you that there is something there that man may know. Something beyond the apparent nothingness of the Edge, calling you to break through, to discover the great Mystery that lies beyond it."

Elta shuddered. "Don't ask me to partake of *all* your blasphemy. The realm of the God lies beyond the Edge. No man shall ever know what lies beyond the Edge."

"Pah—! *I* know what lies beyond. I have seen it."

"You!"

"In vision I have seen it. There is a great land of desert. Red and white sands stretching from horizon to horizon. There is no Edge there. Only a circle of blue sky that reaches the ground all around. It is hot, and fiery winds sweep clouds of

sand like a million sharp needles through the air. And in the midst of this desert is a pinnacle. Some day I shall reach it. There is something there. I do not know what it is, but I shall find out."

He stopped and stared down at Elta as she fell behind him. She had ceased walking as if frozen instantly. Her hand went to her mouth as she backed slowly away from him.

"How do you know of this thing? It can't be true. Ketan . . . Ketan, you must never try to find this pinnacle. You must not find it. Say you will not.

"I will go with you, now, tonight. We shall make our companionship and we'll go wherever you say—here or in Dark Land. I'll never leave your side again, Ketan. Only promise me you'll forget these horrible things.

"Let us go back to Teacher Daran. Go into the House of Wisdom. He will withdraw his complaint."

Ketan smiled wryly and looked far beyond her. "You'd hate me forever if I did."

She trembled as if with cold.

They came soon to a curve in the road that led around the large restricted parkway surrounding the center of all Kronweld, the holiest spot of ground that existed—the Temple of Birth.

Gleaming white even in the black and violet of the night, the thick, mighty walls of the Temple gave forth their own inherent light.

The structure was a quarter of a sphere resting in the corner of the intersection between the Edge and the surface of Kronweld. As always, faint strains of music came from far away, from somewhere inside the Temple itself. Through the vast gardens a faint wind rustled the trees and drifted perfume from the flowers.

They walked slowly on the outskirts, not daring to cross the gleaming purple line around the Temple, beyond which no one could trespass and live.

Ketan recalled a few *tara* before; he had watched an earnest, foolish young Seeker dash across the forbidden line in fanatic defiance of the most sacred laws of Kronweld—and vanish in a puff of flame.

Terrible atomic forces lay quiescent in the thin line. They held fast the secrets of the Temple of Birth and lashed out with unrelenting death upon the Seekers who trespassed.

Ketan paused opposite the center of the forbidden arc. Before him, the scene was like a vast stage—the great black

curtain of the Edge stretching to infinity and the chill, mysterious Temple lying at its foot.

Directly before him, in the center of the garden, stood a glorious golden statue, four times life size. It was of a dancing girl, poised on tiptoe in a graceful pirouette, laughing up at the sky. Transluscent, beaten gold leaf formed her swaying skirt.

She was the first woman.

A thousand *tara* ago, the first woman had found the first man, immature and elemental, who had been created in this spot. She had cared for him until he reached maturity. Then she had directed him to build the great Temple into which she had disappeared and he never saw her again. All creation henceforth had taken place within the Temple of Birth.

Once each *tara* thereafter the gates of the Temple opened and a new group of human beings emerged and were led out into the world.

At the same time, women of Kronweld who volunteered for lifetime service entered the Temple to spend the rest of their lives in the service of birth. They were replacements for those who had died during the *tara*.

Ketan viewed the building somberly. "I'll destroy that some day," he said softly. "It's like a horrible disease in the flesh of Kronweld. If it were not for that building and the secrets it keeps from us, we would know the secrets of life long ago. We would know the origin of man. We would perhaps know the solution to the Mystery of the Edge."

"If it doesn't destroy you first," said Elta. "Let's go away. It makes me afraid."

They turned away in time to see a two-man car glide silently up beside them. Instantly, Ketan knew its purpose. Elta felt a chill of dull fear close in upon her.

Servicemen.

They climbed out and approached Ketan.

"You are learner Seeker Ketan?" One of them spoke in statement, rather than question.

He was a round-faced, paunchy man who spoke with the pride of one who had been unable to achieve the heights of Seekership, but who had occasional authority over them as an emissary of the First Group.

Ketan nodded slowly in answer to the question, and remained silent.

"You are requested to return to your house and appear before the reprimander of the First Group by the second rising."

"Who makes a complaint against me?"

The fat Serviceman leered smugly. "You have made no secret—"

The taller, more dignified Serviceman interrupted. "Respect to you, learned Seeker Ketan—it is Teacher Daran who has brought your name before the Group. We but carry out our mission. May we accompany you?"

Ketan looked at the man's earnest face intently. He knew the man's story as certainly as if he heard it from the man's own lips. He had seen these Servicemen before—too fumbling and unthinking in their habits to ever become Seekers, yet worshiping fervently at the shrine of Seeking. He knew the duty of his arrest must pain the man.

But the other was impatient. "At once, if you please!"

Ketan turned, ignoring the Serviceman's insolence, and murmured a word to Elta. Then he stepped into the car, leaving her staring in unbelief.

6

ELTA STOOD MOTIONLESS IN THE NIGHT UNTIL THE CAR HAD long disappeared around a turn in the road. Above her the reflected lights of Fire Land whipped in mad patterns of color that turned the landscape into a living, twisting thing. It writhed as if reflecting the torment of her own mind.

Swiftly, then, she turned and retraced her steps. The soft night wind touseled the golden strands of her hair as she turned into the path leading to the garden of Teacher Daran. He was still reclining on the grass listening to the music.

She approached through the mist floating over the garden.

"What are you going to do with him?" she demanded without preamble.

The old man looked up with a slow, knowing smile. "Do? My dear, there's only one thing we *can* do with him. He must die, of course."

Elta's crying fear jerked and tore at the bands of her self-control. "Can't you think of any other solution to human problems but death? Is your mind so far gone in its dotage that no clever solution is at all possible now?"

"Sorry, Elta," he said maliciously, "but I'm afraid you can't scold me into saving your lover's life. He threatens our whole existence. In the hundred and twenty years that we

have been here he is the first man of Kronweld to become dangerously aware of us. He will discover us completely if he is allowed to go on."

"The first except Igon and all those who followed him."

"We took care of them—just as we are going to take care of this Ketan."

At that moment a tall, magnificent figure approached them through the streamers of vapor that tumbled from the mud fountain.

Teacher Daran turned slightly. "Recline, Leader Hoult," he invited, his voice edged with a trace of mockery.

Hoult ignored it. "Did you know that Matra was out of the Temple tonight?" he demanded.

"No!" Daran leaped to his feet. "Whom did she see?"

"Our fair companion's lover, for one thing. She would be sure to go to the *Karildex* to try to spot us, but I went there tonight and found Ketan pretending to be working on a problem. It was obvious when I mentioned her that he had seen her. How much she found out, I don't know. I've long suspected that Ketan knows the operation of the master keyboard."

He turned meaningly to Elta. "How much did he tell you?"

She hesitated, looking from one to the other, and then her fear exploded into catastrophe. It was no use trying to shield Ketan from what they were certain of.

"He merely told me that you had come there, looking for an old woman."

"That means she found us, then." Daran swore volubly.

"Why do you say that? You always jump to conclusions."

"And usually correct ones, my dear. You see, if he hadn't known that you were one of the Statists, he would never have told you merely that. He was simply testing you. I hope you didn't react—though you probably did."

Elta let her glance fall away from the two. Her heart was sick and weary within her, sick of the years of deception and falsehood. She stared for a seeming eternity into the bubbling mud pool.

"All right," she said at last. "He does know of us, then. He told me that Matra had found us. He knows about me but is unwilling to believe it.

"As to the duties I was given to perform here, they are now complete. My sister has the complete information on atomic power. It is in a form that our leading engineers can understand, this time. Nothing more is needed. Therefore, I withdraw. I ask for your mercy upon Ketan. When he comes before

the Council, your power is sufficient to have him exiled to Dark Land. I will go with him. We shall live out our lives in Dark Land and you can go on with you miserable struggle to sustain your futile position. You can carry that word to my beloved father," she said with bitterness. "But let us live—even as savages—and we shall be grateful never to see your faces or hear of you again."

"You pretend that you would give up all you have known in exchange for the Bors of Dark Land—and your Ketan!" Daran laughed softly. "You expect us to believe that!"

"I wonder—" Hoult said thoughtfully. "Perhaps she is right, Daran. Surely we could spare that much mercy for one who has served the Statists so faithfully. You say the complete information on atomic power has been turned over to your twin?"

"I don't trust her any more than this one," Daran exploded hotly. "She is hungry for power. She would slit the throats of all of us if she thought it would do her any good."

Elta smashed the open palm of her hand against his face. Hoult chuckled.

"Daran is simply too suspicious and bloodthirsty. I think we can grant you that much mercy—providing what you say is true. If we have the secret of atomic power, we will seal up Kronweld forever, and let it die. If you wish to die with it, that is no concern of ours."

"Thank you."

She turned after a moment and strode away from them through the fog.

Her heart was heavy. She knew she had failed. They had not believed her. Only one more desperate chance remained. She must go back to her father as quickly as possible. Yet it would not be possible at all without the knowledge of Hoult and Daran. She must find a way to keep it secret.

The two men watched her slim figure disappear like a wraith in the mist.

"You're a fool," Daran croaked. "Do you think for an instant that she will be content to live in Dark Land? If we should seal it up, they would be at work breaking through the very instant we did. Men like Ketan can be conquered only by death."

"I've often noticed a quality in the old," replied Hoult with intent thoughtfulness, "they have a tendency to simplify matters so, and deal directly when subterfuge is much more effective. Do you think for a moment that I have the power to cause abandonment of our predetermined plan of utter de-

struction of Kronweld—because of an idle promise to a love-sick girl?"

For the entire distance to his home, Ketan saw only the smooth cast surface upon which they rode. His head was down, the tight planes of his forehead pursed with somewhat nervous determination.

His hands grasped the lapels of the day cloak which he had thrown needlessly about his shoulders again and drew it tight, outlining the slump of his shoulders which the Servicemen interpreted as dejection.

They knew Ketan's house and drew up before it without asking for direction. Slightly ahead of them, he entered the house first and light flooded on. Ketan threw aside his cloak and motioned the Servicemen to lounges. It was their right to his hospitality for the night while they kept a formal watch over him.

They sat down. The paunchy one began toying with the refreshment levers on the panel at his side.

"Help yourself," Ketan invited.

A tray swung out beneath the refreshment panel, bearing the food and drink the Serviceman selected. He offered some to his companion who shook his head irritably.

Ketan went immediately to a desk, selected a sheet and began writing after first adjusting the stylus to *permanent*. Its delicately heated tip began burning words into the treated paper.

While the Servicemen gorged, Ketan wrote furiously, and when he was through, Ketan rose. His eyes were filled with suppressed emotion and his cheeks were flushed.

"Take this to the Council at once," he ordered.

The two glanced at the sheet. The taller looked across at him. "You don't dare—the risk is too great for so little."

The paunchy one set down a glass and eyed him. "It isn't many learner Seekers who tempt the Seekers Council this way. If you take what's coming to you, they will simply order you to cease your inquiry into the lines that Teacher Daran has complained of. Why tempt them to throw you down to ordinary Servicemanship—like us?" He leered with curiosity.

"A full hearing before the Seekers Council is my privilege," said Ketan. "I am asking a public hearing. Carry the message."

The Serviceman took a final swallow from his glass and stepped out to the car. As leader of the two, it was his duty to carry Ketan's appeal to the First Group, but he was reluctant to give up a night of ease in Ketan's house.

"You were not always a Serviceman?" Ketan settled on the lounge and turned to his remaining attendant.

The man smiled a wry, wistful smile. "No—respect to you —may I speak as a co-operator?"

"As as equal," Ketan assented.

"I am Varano. I proposed the cultivation of the creatures of Dark Land for food—that we might find an excellent and useful source of food there. Igon and others were forced to use them when they became lost there. I was declassed for my barbarism."

"So you were the one. I remember the instance." Ketan looked at the Serviceman quizzically with a half smile on his face. Then he indicated the buttons on the refreshment panel.

"Push the blue one down twice and pull up on the red one."

"Pull *up*—?"

The Serviceman, Varano, obeyed wonderingly. Then his eyes popped and his mouth hung open. The tray swung slowly out bearing a steaming slab of browned meat.

He leaped up and glanced furtively around the room as if hidden eyes might be watching him. "Hide it!" he cried. "You could be declassed for life on the evidence of this."

"You are the only one in the vicinity with authority to bring that about. Taste it." He motioned towards the thick steak.

Slowly, the Serviceman sat down again. "What do you want of me?"

"Nothing. Just thought you'd like a little more substantial nourishment than your fat little friend had."

The Serviceman deliberately cut a piece from the steak and ate it. "You're a queer one, Ketan. I wish we'd met—before. But all that is vain. There is no hope for either of us. You will be declassed as surely as the two globes rise tomorrow. Kronweld must protect itself from your kind—it is too small to hold you."

"What about yourself?"

Varano shrugged. "It's all settled and I've forgotten the ambitions I once had. It's just as well. The First Group knows best. I'm in the place I belong."

Ketan shook his head. "I know your kind. You've let them beat you down until there's nothing left of the things you once dreamed and planned. You're nothing but an empty shell, doing the bidding of a bunch of worn-out old men and women."

Varano flushed and rose slowly. "You forget my purpose in remaining here. It is not your province to insult."

"Sorry." Ketan rose. "You don't need to get so stiff about it."

He hesitated, then: "Come with me and I'll show you what I am talking about."

Varano hesitated, then followed as Ketan led him out of the room and down a short corridor past his laboratories. At the end, they came to steps leading downward. It seemed to the Serviceman that there were hundreds of endless steps burying them ever deeper in the ground as they plodded down the lighted way.

They made a turn and came to the bottom at last. The room was white-walled and perfectly blank on its four narrow sides. Ketan whistled a low tune and a panel slid aside revealing an immense cavern beyond.

From somewhere deep within it came a low growl and a steady rumbling that picked the short hairs on the back of Varano's neck. An unfamiliar rank odor stabbed at his nostrils.

"The source of your steak. Come along."

They entered and the door closed behind them. The room was large, equipped with Seeker's tools such as the Serviceman had never dreamed of, but that was not strange to him. It had been a long time since he had worked in a laboratory.

They passed on and came to a darkened corridor in which the fetid smell became stronger and almost sickening.

"They can't stand much light," Ketan explained.

As he spoke, they stopped before a barred partition and he switched on a low light.

The Serviceman could not conceal the impulse of horror that leaped within him. "Bors!"

A great, shaggy beast rumbled towards them, head lowered, red eyes glowing malignantly out of the darkness.

It stood half again as high as a man and its head looked like a huge black boulder surmounted by twin curved horns that hooked out menacingly. It snorted and pawed the floor, creating a dull thunder that echoed in the cavern.

The Serviceman backed fearfully. "But how did you ever get it here?" he cried incredibly. "I tried, myself, long ago. The ban—"

"The ban is easily evaded," said Ketan, "if one is resourceful. But that isn't what I brought you here to see. Look."

The Serviceman turned again. Now, a second beast, slightly smaller than the first was approaching with fearful inquisitiveness.

"Two of them—"

"Yes—two—the two I brought with me from Dark Land in defiance of the ban our stupid leaders insist on against the bringing of any life but human into Kronweld. I followed the

Bors for many days alone until I found their lair in the darkest parts of Dark Land. There I found small Bors, not these great beasts—do you understand what that means?"

Ketan had grasped the harness strap of the Serviceman in a fierce grip and now his eyes were boring into those of Varano. The Serviceman returned the gaze as if hypnotized.

"Do you understand what that means—Bors an eighth the size of these animals? I brought three of them back with me. One we have eaten. Now look into the cage and tell me what you see!"

The very fierceness of Ketan's emotion turned the eyes of the Serviceman to the cage and then he cried out: "Back in the corner—a third—it is a *baby* Bors!"

"Now do you believe I have something to tell the First Group—to tell all Kronweld. I have found the secret of life itself."

7

THE SERVICEMAN HAD FALLEN ASLEEP ON THE LOUNGE AND was emitting rumbling snores. But there was too much to be done for Ketan to sleep much.

He first drew out his own car and loaded it with the plates and exhibits to present before the Seekers Council. It was nearly time for the rising of the first globe when he had the last of the dozens of plants stowed away, and behind the car was a massive, sound-proofed trailer in which reposed the family of Bors.

This work completed, he sat down with heavy weariness before his communicating plate and ordered a connection. Shortly, Elta's face appeared on the plate. Her eyes were dry now, but red from past tears.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Nothing—yet. I just called to tell you my application for a public hearing has been entered and I'll soon be on my way. Wish me success, won't you?"

She did not answer, but merely stared at him with her wide, lambent eyes. He returned her gaze softly.

Always he experienced that inexplicable feeling when he looked upon her. Companions were supposed to be chosen ac-

cording to affinity between the works they were doing as Seekers and servants of Kronweld.

But Ketan knew he had not approached Elta simply because she was the foremost Seeker in her section of Physical Reactions. He often wondered if she felt the same about their coming companionship as he did—and wondered if there were something wrong with him for feeling as he did. It was something about which no one ever spoke.

At last she said, "So you did it! Oh, why will you rush on so blindly before you—*know*?"

"I know enough to be sure that this is the only way progress can be made against superstition and blindness. You've got to smash through it and batter it down—or else live in its smothering encirclement."

"Not when you have nothing more to offer than you have."

"I have all I need. I have my plants and I have the Bors. What more could they want?"

She gazed at him long and fondly. "There is one thing more that we might offer them—you and I—"

He shook his head. " I don't dare, yet . . . not *you*, Elta—"

"Of course you don't, because you don't *know*." She shuddered slightly as if with cold and her tousled, fire-gold hair fell across her face.

"There can be only one result." Her voice became a monotone of resignation. "You will be declassed—never again will you be able to Seek. Never will you be able to find the answer to any of the Mysteries that exist."

She looked up now in firm decision. "This will be the end of the life we've known, Ketan. Don't wait for the hearing before the Council—flee for your life. Even though you may be merely declassed now, there are those who will not let you live. You are too dangerous to those whose personal ambitions demand the destruction of Kronweld. Hoult will not let you live! Go into Dark Land, now—tonight. Wait for me there. I will come to you soon. You must do this, Ketan, believe me!"

Her pleading, agonized image grew larger in the plate, until he seemed to be able to reach out and touch her. The intensity of her expression held him entranced.

She cut off.

He realized absently that the plate had turned its normal blank gray. He tried to call back, but she refused to answer.

Slowly, he turned away from the instrument. What had she meant by saying that he must flee for his life? Had she told Hoult and Teacher Daran that he knew who they were? Did

they know that the withered old woman had given him her command to slay all three?

He shook off the thought. Elta would not have betrayed him.

The second globe had almost risen when he woke. He brushed a hand across his face and struggled up. He hadn't intended to go to sleep, just take a moment's rest.

The entrance signal was jangling furiously. He whistled a note and the portly Serviceman rushed in.

"The Seekers Council are not accustomed to waiting," he snapped.

"Maybe some of us aren't as anxious to obtain declassing as you were."

They turned at the sound of the voice. The second Serviceman, Varano, stood in the doorway, sharp-eyed from his night's sleep. His leader snapped a look that Ketan knew would be followed later by reprimand.

Ketan hurried out of the room to get into his harness and finish his preparations. He returned shortly and announced his readiness.

The shining white cube of the House of Control lay in a straight line through the city from the Temple of Birth. It was the edifice second in importance in Kronweld.

Ketan led his car along a road that disappeared directly beneath the building. Down a steep, brightly lit corridor they rolled until they came to the huge freight elevator that would carry his exhibits up to the hall of justice.

The high, shining corridors of the building were frigid in their marble hardness. Their footsteps rattled against the walls until their marching sounded like an approaching mob.

Ketan had expected to see a large number of people filing into the hall, but the corridors were empty except for the three of them. The paunchy Serviceman seemed to read his thoughts.

"I neglected to tell you previously that the Council rejected your application for a public hearing—they said it was not important enough to warrant a public proclamation. The hearing will be before the Council only."

A cold premonition gripped Ketan. He knew that the Serviceman's neglect was deliberate, and he sensed the refusal of the Council to grant a public hearing was a deliberate plot against the spreading of his revelations among the populace.

Half the effect would be nullified if he spoke only before

the Council. He had counted strongly on making an appeal to some of the Seekers who might be in the audience. He knew they would be easier to convert than the Council itself. Now, the stiff and barren-minded Council would form his only audience.

He was on time. The clerk read his name as the two Servicemen escorted him into the sumptuous hall.

Beneath the high ceiling of glistening gold and marble was the Council table. From it, twenty pairs of eyes turned upon him—only one member was absent.

Some of those eyes focused on him in wrath like a burning glass. Some curious, some quizzical, some squinting in disbelief, all amazed at what they saw.

Not once in ten *tara* did a learner Seeker demand an appearance before the Council. Not one in a hundred who did escaped declassing.

Ketan's black hair that spilled in a half touseled way above the edge of his forehead bespoke youthful incompetence, but the deep-set eyes beneath stabbed out uncomfortably at them, as if guiding a mind-probing ray that bit deeply into the inner thoughts of each of them. Several glanced away in discomfiture.

They were ringed in solemn dignity about the outer edge of a semicircular table. To the hollow space in the center Ketan strode slowly and with deliberation. The Servicemen left him standing alone in the center of the great hall and departed. Varano gave his hand a brief grip before he disappeared.

Opposite Ketan sat Leader Hoult. A solemn black cape hung from his shoulders in useless semblance of a day cloak. His black eyes glared upon Ketan—and held his inner thoughts in utter secrecy.

Ketan returned his gaze, wondering how much the man knew, wondering what kind of a double role the man was playing.

"We have previously heard the complaint of Teacher Daran," he said. "You have asked for a hearing before the Seekers Council. You may make any statement you see fit. You have the privilege of the Council. Proceed."

A pounding began to rise in his chest, but it quieted when he started to speak.

"I have not come before you, respected Seekers, so much to answer the complaint against me as to ask a question of you and to present the results I have obtained in my Seeking —Seeking which I frankly admit to be in the realm of forbidden Mysteries."

A sudden shifting rippled through the Council. Shoulders hunched forward as if they were preparing to leap on him en masse.

"You admit such?" the Leader asked. His eyebrows raised like a shaggy brush. Ketan thought he looked suddenly disconcerted.

"I state it. The question I ask is why is the Mystery I have chosen forbidden? What is there that we are afraid of?"

"Just what is this Mystery you have chosen?" an ingratiating voice came from one end of the table. He turned and recognized Anot, the newest member of the Council, who had performed much applauded Seeking into the structure of the ground beneath Kronweld.

"It is the Mystery of us—you and me. Why we are here . . . how we came here—"

For a wild moment he felt a terrible surge of panic and uncertainty. What was he doing here? How could he ever tell these stone-faced cadavers how he felt at night looking up at the terrifying blankness of the Edge—the surging mystery of the Temple of Birth—the threatening unknown of Dark Land— They had never known the feelings that were locked within him.

"It is the Mystery of existence, the Mystery of life that I would Seek out—"

"You are not very clever," said Leader Hoult.

"Look, let me show you."

Ketan's exhibits were being rolled into the hall from the rear. He retreated, then pushed forward a rolling table on which some of his plants had been placed. He set up his screen and his projector before them.

"Why is it that man found no life in Kronweld when he came?" he challenged rhetorically. "Why was Kronweld a barren world for so many long *tara* until Igon pierced Fire Land and brought plants—trees and flowers—from Dark Land? Why do we yet have to bring all plants from Dark Land into Kronweld?"

"Such questions are adequately answered by our religion. Seekers have no concern with such."

Ketan turned to face the quiet-voiced speaker who addressed him. It was bland-faced Nabah, representative of religion on the Council. For many *tara* he had struggled for a place on the Council to control and preserve the sacred Mysteries from the prying of too energetic Seekers. Ketan knew that here was a man who would stab him in the back at every turn.

"The God placed man in Kronweld, and plants in Dark Land. That is the proper province of each. Question not the disposition of the God," Nabah intoned from his creed.

"Then man defies the God each time he brings a plant into Kronweld?"

The room was still and all eyes were intent upon Ketan and Nabah.

"Man is the master of all," the latter said. "It is his privilege to do as he wills with the materials of Dark Land."

"Then it is his privilege to open all Mysteries connected with the plants of Dark Land. That is a thing which I have sought—and found. Look."

He flashed a drawing on the screen before them. It was a skeleton outline of a flower.

"This blossom may represent the flower part of all plants, for all of them contain these essential parts in one form or another. We have in the center an elevated stalk with a bulbous form at its base containing small ovules.

"Surrounding this stalk are numerous small filaments bearing minute grains of power. When these grains light upon the central stalk of this same flower—or more generally, of the flower of a neighboring plant—the grains pierce the length of the stalk and subsequently unite with the small ovules in the base."

"That has been known for many *tara*," said Leader Hoult. "Have you nothing new at all to offer?"

"I have this: Can any of you tell me the purpose of this strange mechanism which is universal among plants in one form or another?"

Nabah smiled across to Anot. Members of the Council ill concealed their affected boredom. Leader Hoult said, "You are young, Ketan, and you have yet learned little of the traditions of Seeking which have been firmly established among the great in Wisdom in Kronweld. There was a time once when it was the proper thing to inquire of every new discovery in nature: 'What is the purpose of this thing? Why was it formed so?'

"We have long since ceased to so concern ourselves. We accept the existence of such things and the Wisdom of the God in so forming them, and let it be an end to the matter. It is not Wisdom to pursue Seeking to absurd lengths."

"Neither is it Widsom to cease Seeking while still in the folds of ignorance," Ketan blazed recklessly. "It is little wonder that no truly great Seekers have been found since the great Igon did his work—and was exiled and nearly slain for

it. Seekers since then have been stifled by the traditions that have crusted about our Wisdom. I have broken those traditions and see what I have found!"

He held up a handful of small seeds. "Within these ovules—into whose purpose you never thought to inquire—is the potential creation of new plants. I have put some of them in moist ground and supplied them with conditions as they are in the Dark Land and this is the result."

He swept a hand towards a row of twenty plants, varying systematically in height.

"These were created one day apart, and each came from one tiny ovule. Respected Seekers, we have in our hands the secret of life itself."

A wave of frowning consternation swept through the Council. Someone—Ketan didn't see who—murmured, "A commendable work, if this thing be true."

But Nabah was instantly on his feet. "See how he blasphemes! I call now for his declassing. We cannot have such among the respectful inhabitants of Kronweld. There is nothing such a man would not do. Listen to him: 'We have in our hands the secret of life itself.' Next he will propose that we open the Temple of Birth to all Kronweld!"

It was a shocking, unseemly thing, the way Nabah ranted. And Leader Hoult seemed utterly disinclined to control him. Suddenly, Ketan saw the pattern of the opposition. While there was no actual collusion between them, Hoult was giving Nabah free rein and counting on the nature of the man to sway the Council to condemn Ketan.

Yet Ketan hesitated in accepting such a picture. It was a poor game, seemingly, that Hoult was playing. The other members had an instinctive dislike for Nabah; they would not be overly inclined to accept his leadership in pronouncing sentence. Either that, or Hoult was so confident that Ketan's presentation would be so weak it would require no more opposition than Nabah could influence.

Deetan, one of the elderly women Seekers on the Council, ignored Nabah's protests. She addressed Ketan with interest. "If this a natural thing, and the way plants are created in Dark Land, why is it not a common thing in Kronweld? Why must all plants be brought here from Dark Land?"

Ketan shook his head. "That is yet another Mystery, one on which I have found no Wisdom. Much work remains to be done on the entire matter. I have made but a beginning."

Deetan turned to Leader Hoult. "I find nothing that blas-

phemes the God in this man's Seeking. I offer my commendations. He has opened a wonderful new field to us."

Leader Hoult nodded. "We shall Seek into the matter further."

Ketan looked at him in astonishment. He saw unmistakably that Hoult was dismayed by the turn of events. But there was a crafty reserve in his eyes.

Ketan knew what that reserve was. Hoult was sure Ketan had not finished.

Should he go on, he wondered. He could stop now with the achievement of having opened the study this far. But he could not stop now. This was only preparation for what was to come. If he stopped here, he would fail.

"Have you more to show us?" Hoult leaned forward with feigned interest in the actual work.

"I have more," he said. "When Igon first went into Dark Land you remember that men of Kronweld could conceive of no other form of living, moving beings other than themselves. When Igon brought back reports and pictures of the Bors and other creatures of Dark Land his life was sought because of his bold blasphemy."

"Those were primitive times, relatively speaking," remarked Nabah. "You are not likening yourself and your times to that situation, I trust?"

"Regardless of the relative states of Wisdom between Igon's day and my own, the creatures of Dark Land are still looked upon with holy revulsion and are not fit subjects for Seeking."

"Rightfully so," agreed Anot. "Seeking should be reserved for the higher things of life."

Ketan stared at the semicircle of faces about him. Respected Seekers! Why, they were little more than aged children in their confused and turbid thinking.

He ignored the illogical interruption. "I spent most of a *tara* in Dark Land some time ago. There, I encountered the Bors in their natural environment. And I discovered that what is true of the plants of Dark Land is also true of the animal creatures."

He waited a minute, a long pause while this sank into the minds of his judges. Then a bedlam erupted. Half the staid Councilors were on their feet shouting imprecations at him.

Hoult was forced to act. "Enough of this! Is it possible that the wild imaginings of a mere boy should arouse the Council to such indignity?"

To Ketan he turned. "A moment ago you roused our in-

terest in your work. Now, you move me to put the judgment to the Council at once. You are not capable of pursuing a career of Seeking further—stating that the animals of Dark Land are grown from seeds that are embedded in the ground."

"I did not say that. I stated that the same principle that applies to plants applies also to animals. In this instance the ovule that grows into a new creation does not require embedding in the ground. Rather, it remains inside the body of one of the animals—the woman animal if we may so term it—and grows to a certain degree of maturity there before separating itself."

Anot rose dramatically. "From the days of the great Igon down to the present, men have gone into Dark Land, studied minutely the things which the God has placed there, and hundreds of pictures of Bors have been brought back. All of them showed animals of a uniform size. Yet now we are asked to believe that Bors exist so small as to be able to be contained in the body of another Bors. I, for one, have had enough of this drivel. It appears that Leader Hoult is correct in calling for judgment of the Council."

He sat down amid nods of approval. Ketan looked about the semicircle with pity in his glance. Then without a sound he turned and went to the huge air-conditioned cage of the Bors, which had been rolled in behind him.

He adjusted the controls that caused it to roll slowly towards the space in the center of the Council and put a plane of three-quarters polarized vibration in front of the animals.

There was no sound for a moment until the largest Bors emitted a bellow that echoed like thunder in the great hall.

"Servicemen!" Leader Hoult shrieked.

Varano and his companion came running from out of nowhere. They seized him by the arms and held him stiffly.

"Before you order me out," advised Ketan, "look within—closely."

Involuntarily, the group let their fearful glances stray into the depths of the cage. One by one they saw it, and were transfixed.

The baby Bors nosed out from under the larger animal and sniffed at the front of the cage, blind to the gaping Seekers who were nearly invisible behind the polarized shield.

Leader Hoult sank back in his seat with almost real amazement on his face. "This is an astounding thing you have shown us—but of course it does not prove your contention regarding the origin of the animal."

"Can you wait any longer for proof that he is worthy of declassing?" shouted Nabah. "He has violated the ban of Kronweld against bringing creatures of Dark Land here."

"Yes, there is that, too—" Leader Hoult murmured. Ketan looked into his eyes and sensed that the man was turning over in his mind the possibilities offered now by this new outrage against society.

Ketan shrugged free of the grip of the Servicemen. "Leave me alone for half a *tara* with the two larger Bors and I will prove my discovery to you. At the end of that time I will show you three Bors."

Cries of "No!" arose. It started with Nabah, who cried out, "This man is too dangerous to remain in Kronweld."

Deep within them, four or five of the Councilors felt a tug of the ancient spirit of Seeking which had moved genius in past ages to defy barriers of the God and of man to probe the secrets of Kronweld and Fire Land and Dark Land.

But the surge was weak and these remained silent under the smothering weight of decades of tradition.

"We cannot permit such an experiment, Ketan," Hoult spoke almost benevolently now. "The very presence of the Bors is in defiance of our holy bans. This alone is more than enough to declass you. It is unthinkable that we could countenance your further Seeking along these lines, however, in consideration of your work on plants I am moved to suggest mercy to the extent of—"

"I'm not asking for your mercy!" Ketan flared. "I'm asking for the application of Wisdom, which appears to be a rare occurrence in this hall."

He halted, awed by his own foolish rashness, then rushed on. "If the Bors are a defiance of the whimsies of the old men of Kronweld, then away with the Bors. I challenge you to let me prove what I have found in a way that no man can deny."

"And how is that?" Leader Hoult asked coldly.

"Human beings can demonstrate the truth of my findings as well as can Bors."

There was a terrible silence in the hall. The only sound was the muffled snorting of the small Bors. Then Leader Hoult spoke softly—softly with acid menace.

"What was that you said, Ketan?"

"Allow me to complete my work and become a Seeker. It has been agreed that I and the Seeker Elta will make our companionship at that time.

"We will show you then the origin of human life and wipe away the fog and blind superstition that clouds this Mystery—

we will point the way to the destruction of the Temple of Birth and make common its Mysteries among all men of Kronweld."

"I think you had better say more." Leader Hoult's words were deliberately carved of ice and chipped off one at a time.

"The interior of the bodies of men and women contain mechanisms similar to those I have shown you in the plants—and similar to those of the Bors. As with the Bors, the ovules which create human life are carried within the interior of the woman being until the young creation is separated from her. That is how you and I, respected Seekers, came into being!"

There was no outcry, no shouts of condemnation, no shrinking from blasphemy.

The feelings of the men and women on the Seekers Council went to infinite depths below such expression. They merely sat and stared in dumb horror at Ketan.

"How do you know what is in the interor of the human body?" Leader Hoult inquired in level tones.

Then Nabah was on his feet, shouting again. "He has dared desecrate a human form by cutting into it. Our only obligation is death for this man!"

"I have no need to cut," replied Keaton. "I have a machine with which I can see into the depths of flesh and bone. I have mapped and drawn the entire mechanisms of the human body. They are intricate beyond belief."

Suddenly one of the Councilors was very sick. He left his seat and hurried away. A Serviceman approached to clean up.

Those adjacent moved away, but one of them stared straight in front of him and spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Who in all Kronweld since the God first placed man here has conceived a more monstrous thought?

"Imagine walking along the streets of the city and encountering another human being—and knowing that you had once been inside that body?"

He, too, became sick and hurried away.

8

THE SEEKERS COUNCIL CONFISCATED THE PLANTS AND THE Bors and all the evidence and exhibits Ketan had brought with him, the result of long *tara* of work.

Serviceman Varano was detailed to accompany Ketan back to his house. The place seemed as empty as his heart. The two of them entered silently.

The Council had refused to return judgment in his presence, which in itself was a strange aberration of their normal procedure. Ketan wondered what reason lay behind this. Elta's pleading warning came back to him, "Hoult will not let you live!"

The desire to live, to fight again, was dimmed. He had failed. He had failed miserably. He had tried to blast ages of untruth with a single explosion. Elta had been right. He should have done it slowly, a factor at a time. He saw that now. If he had stopped with his description of the plant reproduction, they would have accepted that much of his claims. He had been a blind, impetuous fool.

He wondered what was left now.

He didn't have to wonder. There was only one thing. He didn't intend to spend the rest of his life as a Serviceman in Kronweld, even if the Council should be content with mere declassing. If Hoult should try to kill him, he would not die without fighting, even if the impulse was low at this time.

He would carry out the plan that Elta had urged upon him, the plan they had dreamed over and worked out long ago, when it seemed a pleasantly wild and romantic thing to exile themselves in Dark Land and there work out their forbidden Mysteries, to build up a renegade community of free Seekers in Dark Land.

This was all that was left.

He turned to Varano as they entered the house. "You heard the proceedings, what do you think?"

"I am not permitted to speak of the matter."

"Come," Ketan snorted irritably. "Last night we spoke as equals and co-operators. Has anything changed since then?"

Varano hesitated, gazing into Ketan's eyes with wistful admiration. "All right then—you're a genius and a fool. That's what I think."

"I doubt the first, but I'm beginning to agree with you about the second. Yet—how is this revolution going to be brought about?"

He turned towards the distant Temple of Birth lying at the base of the curtain of night that spread to infinity. "The symbol of all that impedes Seeking. And it will destroy Kronweld if it is not first destroyed. How can it be done? Women go blindly into that unholy place. Then spend their lives there as breeding vessels. That's where the inhabitants of Kronweld come from. Why do they try to hide it from us? Who is it in there that controls Kronweld in this manner? Is there no one among all our Seekers who knows the truth?"

"If I recall your statements," said Varano, "you said it required both the man animal and the woman animal among the Bors to produce a new creation, and that this was true also of human beings. If so, why is it that only women go into the Temple of Birth?"

"I don't know," Ketan admitted. "In all our history there is no record of a man ever entering into it. Perhaps some Seeker in there has found a way to make that unnecessary. It is not inconceivable that this could be done. It is one of the unknown mysteries of the matter.

"But I'll prove it to them yet! Varano, if you believe what you said, then help me."

"What can I do?"

"I'm going to leave Kronweld. I'm going to take Elta and we'll exile ourselves in Dark Land. We'll produce a new creation of human life and bring it back to show the ignorant fools on the Seekers Council."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Yes—I would. Elta wanted to do it before the hearing. I should have listened to her then. We will dare to do it, all right. Which is better: To live in the freedom of exile, or to live a mere existence barren of Wisdom and Seeking as—"

"—as I do," Varano finished for him.

"I didn't say that, but—"

"It's the only thing you could mean. But I'll answer you. It was right for me to become a Serviceman. I never had the imagination or gift for Seeking that you have. In your case—well, sometimes I wish that we had met long ago, before I

was declassed. Thinks might have been different—for both of us. For me, it is over. For you, I would say go ahead. Prove to all Kronweld, if you can, that the Council is wrong. They will kill you for it, probably, but in the *tara* to come, men may hail you as they now hail Igon."

"I don't want to be hailed. I only want to prove I'm right and find the secrets behind all these great Mysteries. But, if we escape to Dark Land, I will need your help to get past the barrier that blocks the city from Fire Land. If you accompany us, that can be done. Later, you can testify that you were overpowered and forced to accompany us. Will you do it?"

"Yes," Varano said. "And perhaps when history records your achievements my name will not be forgotten as one who aided you in your work."

"Forget history," Ketan snapped. "It makes no difference if no one but the Bors of Dark Land remember us, as long as we accomplish our purpose. Now, there is much to be done."

"You have shields?"

"Only body. I'll need a shielded car in order to pass through Fire Land. Seeker Janu has one. I'll obtain his."

"He's not likely to grant permission."

"I'm not likely to ask for it," Ketan said grimly. "You must help me there, too. It won't be easy to steal such a car and get away quickly before an alarm is raised. Fortunately, such things don't happen often enough for the Council to plan for them."

Varano paled. "It's too dangerous. Theft is a terrible crime."

"Not half as terrible as some crimes that are being committed in Kronweld. Let's eat and refresh ourselves now. We'll detail our plans later."

The first globe was disappearing below the horizon. The half-light had begun to set in, and all the landscape took on the eerie, dimly lit aspect of a dream.

The inhabitants over the city were shedding their day cloaks at this time and going into the most active period of their day, unhampered by the heavy garments.

Ketan and Varano shed theirs as they stepped into the interior room. They washed and changed their brief harness wear and sat before the refreshment panel.

"Might as well have a last one," Ketan smiled grimly as he pressed the secret combination that produced a thick Bors steak. "The Director of Food Center would collapse if

he knew this came out of one of his newest regulation panels."

"How did you do it?"

"Tapped the regular channels and put a lead from my own automatic kitchen."

After the meal Ketan began his extensive preparations for the trip to exile. He gathered the equipment and materials it would be possible to take with him. These were meager. The remainder of the pile he gathered was provisions and supplies for personal needs. All his notes and Seeking materials that he did not take he stored in proper places where Branen would find them easily.

"I must go to Elta now," he announced to Varano. "You will grant permission?"

"Yes—but be careful. I think it would be best if I remained here in case some communication should come for me. Do not let yourself be detected while you're out. I would have to join you in exile if they found I had let you out."

"That might not be a bad idea at that."

Varano looked serious but said nothing.

Ketan stepped to the plate and ordered a connection with Elta's house. He waited long and impatiently while the signal sounded and the response indicated endlessly that she was not there. She had left no indication of her whereabouts for prospective callers.

Ketan cut off. She was always there at this time. He wondered where she could have gone.

He tried the headquarters of the Seekers Group, a social organization. She was not there. Nor was she at the House of Wisdom or any of its units. He then had her called at the entertainment centers and there was still no response.

Worry began to edge into his mind and displace rationality. "Something must have happened. A person just doesn't totally disappear from all her usual locations."

"She could be working with some other Seeker at his house until this time," offered Varano.

"She would have left some word for callers."

"You can't be sure of that."

"But I've got to find her. The time is growing short. I'll take the car and go look."

"You can't do more than you have already. Besides, you're liable to be caught if you just cruise around purposelessly."

"I'll go to her house and keep you in touch with every place I go. If anyone calls for me here, tell them I'm not able to see anyone—after today's ordeal."

He went out into the night and Varano heard the soft whine of the atomic-powered car fade in the distance.

As Ketan drove away, new fears began to froth within him. He remembered Elta's previous words: "I must go away for a little while." And: "This will be the end of the life we've known— Go into Dark Land— Wait for me there—"

What had she meant? Had she actually conceived some mad plan and already carried it out?

There was little danger of encountering anyone who would report him. Only the Seekers Council and the First Group and the two Servicemen knew he was confined to his house. Even the presence of the Serviceman was a mere formality. For him to attempt escape was an unthinkable breach of custom.

Yet there was the vague possibility that Leader Hoult might not consider him above making such a breach after the hearing that had taken place.

He cruised along the streets boldly. The fading twilight was enhanced by the lines of activators above the streets that energized and made luminous a thin sheet of air itself. The city was day bright.

He passed into the more luxurious part of town where the full Seekers lived.

Elta disliked living alone in a house of her own and had moved into one of the four unit combines where quarters were shared with three other Seekers.

Ketan stopped before the beautifully gardened plot and raced to the opening between the marble colonnades. The pale-green walls were restful to his eyes as he sought the third compartment which was Elta's.

He pressed the signal expecting, as always, an instant response. A cold numbness flooded over him as he stared at the response which came. A flashing card lighted momentarily.

"Uninhabited," it read.

Ketan pushed wildly on the signal. Again came the response as before. He pushed the door open and stared within. He could not believe the emptiness he beheld. He opened drawers and cabinets and examined the shelves. Not an item of Elta's possessions remained. She had vanished utterly from the place.

All the mad enthusiasm for the wild escape into Dark Land drained out of him. The ambition that had driven him on to defiance of the Seekers Council suddenly seemed dim and lifeless without Elta.

Where could she have gone?

Then he began to order in his mind the catalogue of possible happenings. A person could not simply vanish into the air. She had to be *some place,* and Kronweld, from one boundary to the other, was not large. He'd search it from one end to the other if need be.

Then he remembered he was a fugitive and his hopes crumbled again.

He strode out of the room and closed the door softly behind him. He went to the door of the adjacent compartment and pressed the signal. The entrance response invited him in.

Two women were in the room. Seekers whom he knew slightly, only by sight. He knew he was a stranger to them.

"Respect to you," he said. "I'm looking for the Seeker Elta. I expected to find her home, and now I see her compartment is uninhabited. Can you tell me where she went?"

One of them rose, a tall willowy woman.

"You must be Ketan," she smiled. "Elta spoke often about you."

She surveyed him intimately for a moment. "Now I know Elta is even a bigger fool than we thought when she left this morning. But don't tell me you don't know where she went!"

The woman's gaze irritated him. "I wouldn't ask if I knew," he said.

"She has left for the Preparation Center. Tomorrow she enters the Temple of Birth to become a Lady of the Temple."

9

THE SILENCE WHEN THE WOMAN STOPPED SPEAKING WAS TERrifying. Ketan felt it was palpable, crushing in upon him like a vise.

He spoke in a dead monotone. "You are sure of that?"

The woman nodded. "I saw her application acceptance and her orders to appear this morning. But don't act as if you'd just been declassed. There are still women in Kronweld—Seekers who might be very companionable. Won't you come in and sit down? Try some of the new refreshments that the Food Center has put on only tonight."

"No . . . no . . . respect to you." Ketan turned mechanically and went into the hall. "I must go. Wisdom."

He hurried into the night.

The numb shock of the news dulled all but the senses necessary to drive the car through the streets, and he drove aimlessly for a time he could not measure.

This could not be what Elta had meant when she told him she was going away and would return to him soon. There was no returning from the Temple of Birth—ever.

While he drove, his mind began to function slowly again. The flight into Dark Land was in vain, now. There must be other plans.

He drove far, around the entire circuit of the city, and when he had completed, his new plans were focused solidly in his mind. He found himself on the wide, scenic roadway that passed before the Temple of Birth. He was almost in the same spot that he and Elta had stood when the Servicemen accosted him.

He stopped there and gazed upon the Temple of Birth. The smaller building of Preparation Center, which was outside the purple line, was an ordinary building of the city, except that there was only a single sealed entrance in its cubical hulk. All the other walls were perfectly blank.

Somewhere within those walls Elta was going through unholy rites known only to the God himself.

Ketan knew what he must do.

And once he had come to a decision, a curious, frightening clarity came over his mind. He saw that this was what he would have done in any event. He had chosen—been guided in choosing—the only step for which he had been ordained from the moment he had emerged from the Temple of Birth twelve *tara* before. All other plans would have failed regardless of his efforts.

As this thought came to him, he seemed to hear a voice but he wasn't sure. He thought it said, "That is correct. Hasten, Lonely One."

Varano was pacing about the room in soaring anxiety as Ketan returned.

"I thought you'd never come. That fool Nelva, my superior, was here twice. I—"

Then he saw Ketan's face. "What did you find?"

Ketan told him of Elta's action. Varano was disconsolate, but resigned. "That about ends it, I guess."

Ketan surveyed the Serviceman at close range for a long moment then drew back his fist in a lightning movement and felled Varano with a single blow on the jaw.

"Respect to you," he murmured as the Serviceman crum-

pled at his feet. "But I'm afraid your conditioning has been too deeply embedded for me to ask for your help from here out."

He hoisted the limp form on his shoulders, then made his way through the hall past his above-ground laboratories and down the steep, seemingly endless flight of steps into the depths under the house.

He took the Serviceman into one of the spotless workrooms where he had patiently solved the problem of the creation of the Bors and laid Varano on a table. He examined the man's breathing closely, then he selected an injector and filled it from a colorless bottle. He pumped the substance into Varano's veins.

After a moment the Serviceman became still and almost lifeless. His breathing slowed until it was nearly undetectable and his heart movements came farther and farther apart. At last they steadied until there was no more slowing. Ketan was satisfied.

Varano would sleep for at least thirty days.

This work was not the result of Ketan's own Seeking. It belonged to Branen and another member of the Unregistereds who had worked it out in conjunction with Ketan's work on the Bors.

They had made only a small beginning in understanding the functions of bodily mechanisms and Ketan hesitated to use the chemical on Varano. But there was no other solution. He believed it was safe.

In the silent room he considered contacting Branen and conferring further now that it was certain that he would have to assume Ketan's leadership of the Unregistereds. But there was little he could hope to accomplish. Branen would have to do the best he could from here on. Ketan hoped he had enough imagination to keep the organization of the Unregistereds from falling apart while he was gone—and longer if he failed to come back.

He wrote Branen a letter explaining Varano's presence, and instructed him to put the Serviceman in a deserted public place at the end of the thirty days that he might regain consciousness outside Ketan's home.

This he put with the notes and instructions he was leaving concerning his work and the organization of the Unregistereds.

For making enlarged models of his plants for study, Ketan had a large quantity of elastic molding plastine. He selected

a mass of the whitish stuff and mixed it rapidly with a light cream and rose pigment.

When he was satisfied with the result he stripped off his harness and began applying the stuff to his body, slowly remolding his contours and pigmenting his body from head to foot.

The result was almost shocking to him as he viewed himself in the metallic mirror. He made a credible-appearing woman; necessarily plump in order to smooth out his muscles, but satisfactory.

The sculptoring was a long and tedious job. His muscles ached with the strain of his contortions when he was through, but he felt the job would pass the inspection of the first woman herself.

He had no harness or light night cloak of the exact type that was worn by women, but the difference in style was slight and he would have to take that much chance.

Ketan climbed the long flight of stairs gingerly. The molding on his body felt as if it would peel loose at any moment. But he knew it was merely an illusion. Nearly boiling water was required to remove it, and then only when it had been partially dissolved in a special solvent.

He was thankful that its porous, minutely spongy nature made it possible for him to perspire or it would have been unendurable in the amount of skin area he had covered with it.

From the remains of the possessions he had gathered for the flight to Dark Land he selected only a powerful harpoon and length of fine cord which he had used as a weapon.

He sealed the opening to the secret laboratory so that no one who did not know the combination to the entrance could ever gain access to it. He darkened the rest of the house then and went out with the harpoon in his possession.

He did not use the car but started afoot in a long easy lope that carried him swiftly over the cast surface of the road.

There were few others about. He slowed when he passed anyone, so as to not attract attention, and ran on when he could not be observed.

He was breathing heavily when he came to the circling road that passed in front of the Temple of Birth. For a moment he paused to catch his breath while he surveyed the exterior of the Preparation Center.

The squat, three-level building was utterly dead to all outside appearances. The single door that served it would open only to one of the secret combinations that would iden-

tify the caller as one who had received her admission orders carrying her particular unique code.

Somewhere within that building was Elta.

The thought repeated itself over and over in his brain.

The building stood alone. The lighting from nearby activators was dim, and fairly dark shadows lay at the rear of the structure where only the pulsing reflections of the sky lit it.

He glanced cautiously in all directions then walked boldly towards the building.

On a line with the rear wall, he suddenly darted into the protecting half darkness of its shadows. He paused, listening and watching. Satisfied he was unobserved, he unslung the small harpoon and attached the line with its grapple head. He raised and fired a silent shot.

Up into the air the grapple sped, snaking the line behind it, and fell over the edge of the roof. Ketan pulled it taut, then tested it with his full weight. It held.

He braced his feet firmly against the wall and began climbing, inching his way to the top. He was desperately handicapped by the smallness of the line. It cut and sliced into the palms of his hands, but he continued the steady advance.

At the top he finally grasped the edge and drew himself over. He lay a moment flat against the roof after drawing up the line and depositing it in a corner.

He glanced around and saw what he had hoped for.

The roof, in common with all others in Kronweld, formed a place for refreshing and sun-ray exposure. There was an entrance from the roof to the interior of the building. He was counting on this being open. Seldom was such a place locked.

This one was.

It was hopeless to try to break through the door whose electric lock made the wall and door as a solid mass of metal. He glanced in momentary despair about the rest of the roof. There was nothing but the usual tables and chairs and lounges and a semi-covered refreshment panel with a capacity of about twenty, he noted.

There was no way in from here short of blasting a hole in the thick stone and metal structure of the building.

The only other alternative was to wait, hoping that someone would open the door from the inside and come out on the roof before it was too late to do him any good. He recognized the more than probable chance that a group of persons would come out at once, making his quest hopeless.

He sat down beside the low wall. Above, the violet lights

flickered and surged. Occasionally for brief moments of darkness, he could glimpse the pinpoints of light in the sky that hung mysteriously over Kronweld. Another of the great Mysteries that man had never solved. And the Seekers Council said man knew almost everything there was to know!

The unhurried time passed slowly. He dozed once and roused in alarm at a sudden sound in the street below, but it was not repeated. His fingers moved over the compartments of his harness, idly checking the small kit he had filled before leaving the laboratory beneath his house. It still contained the filled injector and repair materials for his disguise.

Dawn began to slowly tinge the eastern fringe of the sky. The first globe would rise soon. He wondered desperately what to do. It would be too dangerous to try to get down the way he had come up if he waited much longer. If he were caught here, he didn't know what would happen to him—in addition to the sentence that had by now been passed on him for his blasphemy.

There was no precedent for the crime he was committing now.

A sudden slight sound at the doorway roused the full alertness of his senses. He leaped to his feet and flattened himself against the wall. The door opened quickly for all its ponderous mass. A young woman came out and stood still a moment, watching the lighting sky.

Ketan noted that she was alone, and with further gratefulness he observed that she was only a little less than his height and blessed with plumpness that was not quite as ungainly as his own hurried sculptoring, but was ample. Her hair, too, was trimmed not so differently from his own.

He paused and watched her. She stood face to the rising sun, hair brushed back by the early morning breeze. A thin, white, glistening robe covered her in addition to the common harness wear. He guessed it was some sort of ceremonial garb.

She turned with a start as he stepped away from the wall. "You frightened me. I thought I was the first here this morning," she said. "Isn't the sky beautiful up here in the morning? I wonder if we'll ever see it again afterwards?"

Ketan stepped forward smiling and put his hands quickly about her throat. "Make no sound," he said in passable falsetto. "You will not have to worry about the view of sunrise from the Temple of Birth. You are not going there."

The girl's eyes went wide in sudden fear. She saw he was not one of those who belonged at Preparation Center. "Who are you?" she choked out.

"I hope you never find out. Out of your clothes, quickly now. I must exchange with you."

She trembled even more fearfully. "No! These are my induction robes. I must wear them today to the Temple of Birth."

"That's why I want them," Ketan said grimly. He loosed one hand and tore the fastening loose at her throat and removed her robe. She struggled frantically until he carried her to the corner where he had left the harpoon and line. He bound her hands and gagged her mouth with the corner of the cloak. Then he swiftly exchanged clothing.

When he was through, he freed the bonds and fastened a loop in the end of the line to fit her foot.

"What are you going to do?" she cried.

"Nothing that will harm you." He seized her tightly and drew out the injector which he had transferred to the stolen harness. She had never seen such an instrument, but something of Ketan's manner suggested its purpose and she cried out in terror.

He plunged the point into her arm and emptied it.

"Now, put your foot in this loop and hang onto the line. I will lower you over the edge to the ground." He spoke with a threatening hand on her throat.

"No!" she cried in sudden shame. "I have taken my vows. I must go into the Temple. I can never again live in Kronweld. I would be shunned as a Bors walking in the streets. Let me go!"

"As soon as you are on the ground you can find the nearest Serviceman and tell him what I have done. You will be freed of blame and can enter the next *tara* into the Temple, perhaps."

"They'll kill you!"

"Perhaps. Now quickly—"

He dropped her to the edge and pushed threateningly. She grasped the line and fit it to her foot in self-preservation. Then he lowered her swiftly down. She stood a moment looking up in bitter hatred and fear, but Ketan was gone and the line flicked up to the roof again.

As he went back to the door he caught a glimpse of her racing fleetly down the street. He hoped she was not too good a runner. She might even reach a Serviceman and tell her story yet.

But as he watched she slowed and grasped at her heart as if in sudden pain, then fell headlong.

She would awaken a half day later than Varano.

10

FROM HIS KIT HE MIXED A COLOR PREPARATION TO MATCH the girl's hair and sprayed it into his own. He clipped it as nearly as possible to resemble hers—a low point at the nape of his neck, tapering to shorter length at his temples.

He darkened his eyebrows and applied a thin ridge of plastic to his nose to lessen its apparent width. The girl had a thin, finely-shaped nose and Ketan was disgusted with his attempts at imitation. It would have taken a good sculptor many days to duplicate her finely-molded features.

But it would have to do. He replaced his materials and fastened the compact kit to the glistening white and gold harness that cinched him tightly under the thin robe. It was adjusted to the maximum size, but the girl's seeming plumpness had been somewhat deceptive, he found.

There were two things he could not change. Those were his voice and the color of his eyes. He'd have to take a chance.

He strode to the door and pushed it open.

The short flight of steps led into a long, thickly carpeted corridor. Soft, creamy lighting was present in the energized air. Its impact made a restful sensation on the skin.

Doors lined both sides of the hallway. He stood there in a momentary hesitation about where he should go. He had to learn something about the customs of the place or they would make short work of discovering his deception.

A door behind him opened suddenly and a white-robed girl hurried out. "Come quickly," she said. "It's nearly time for the assembly. We'll be late."

Ketan nodded and smiled and hurried along beside her. This was fortunate. He wondered what the assembly was.

They turned a corner and passed through wide gold doors and found themselves at the rear of a small chamber in which about thirty young women were gathered in a semicircle about a small central platform.

All were gowned in immaculate white robes. The expression on their faces was rapturous. The gathering made a solemn and sacred impression. It almost inspired in him a twinge of conscience at desecrating such a place.

But his remorse was short-lived. He knew that all this was but trimmings to ignorant belief in false gods. The sooner it was torn asunder and truth restored the better for all—including the young women present.

He took a seat beside the girl he had met in the hall. His disguise gave him a moment of panicky self-confidence in which he imagined everyone there was looking at him and knew his sex.

He fought it down.

An older woman emerged from behind curtains and mounted the low platform. She was magnificent in thick gold robes and a crowning helmet that gleamed with white and purple stones. She glanced around amid the instant quiet.

"Ladies of the Temple—for that is now your rightful title," she said, "you are this day no longer women of Kronweld. You belong to a new and larger world, for which you have forsaken forever the old. You belong to the world of the infinite, a world that lies on the very threshold of the realm of the God."

Ketan squirmed. He wished she would say some words that had meaning. But the girl next to him was ecstatic. He wondered if he were missing something of significance.

But his mind refused to concentrate on the speaker's words. Only one thought had pounded within him since he had entered the room. Where was Elta?

Without attracting attention, he tried to crane his neck and get a glimpse of her. This would be a bitter farce if he didn't find her.

She was sitting two rows in front of him. Her eyes were intent upon the speaker. She was drinking in every word that was spoken.

The whole mystery of everything that had happened since the night of his rendezvous at the *Karildex* with the shriveled old woman burst upon him anew in an overwhelming wave.

Question after question assailed him, for which there were no answers. Foremost: Why had Elta come here? Was this the thing she had referred to when she had told him she was going away? It seemed impossible that she had plans to come back from the Temple.

Whether she did or not, there would be no turning back

for him now until he had found the last secret of the unholy place.

He wondered if the old woman had sought him at the *Karildex* again. Would he ever see her again?

He tried to turn his attention back to the woman on the platform.

"You are to preside at the creation of man," she was saying. "To no greater task could you have dedicated your lives. The work of the First Group and the Seekers Council in Kronweld is small beside ours."

Suddenly a new and strange fear grasped Ketan. The woman *meant* what she said.

It took him a moment to grasp the full significance of that. He fought down the fear and told himself his discoveries couldn't be wrong. He had the evidence of the Bors and of his own charts of the interior of the human body. He couldn't be wrong.

Yet how could anyone as close to charlatanism as she was speak as she was speaking. It was different with the members of the Seekers Council. They didn't have any real knowledge of the Mystery. But she must *know*—

He listened abstractedly to her long eulogy of the life of a Lady of the Temple. There was nothing in it that gave him a clue. Her only concrete directions were that they were to be ready to march to the Temple at the rising of the second sun when the building would have its once in a *tara* opening.

They were dismissed and went out from the room. Ketan wound among the small groups that coalesced in knots of conversation and sought Elta. She was not joining any of the groups either, and hurried away. He caught up with her and spoke urgently. "May I see you alone—?"

She turned. The nearness of her brought a tightness to his throat. "Of course, Murna—" Her hand went to her throat. "You're not Murna— Who are you? I've never seen you here before!"

"Please," he said urgently, "in your room?"

Doubtfully, she turned and led the way. He looked back, but no one was following them. Then they were inside the room and he closed the door. He approached closer to her. She backed in half fright.

"Look closely, Elta." His voice lowered to its masculine pitch. "Do you see nothing in me that you recognize?"

Her eyes widened in horror. "Ketan—!"

"I had to come after you, Elta. Why have you done this insane thing?"

"Me!" she gave a short despairing laugh. "What about you? How did you get in here? What do you intend to do? Don't you know that if they found you here, killing would be mild to what they would do to you? That's merely the penalty for one of the girls if she leaves after taking the vows and receiving her instructions."

"So that's the kind of discipline that's necessary here. It must be a benign place. I'm going to expose its corruption to all Kronweld."

"Oh, you fool, you fool—" Elta sank wearily on the bed. "You don't *know* anything about this place.

"Why wouldn't you trust me, Ketan? I told you I'd come back to you and we'd go into Dark Land. Now—"

"Back? From here? Is this where you intended to go all the time?"

She nodded, her head bowed.

"Why?"

"I can't tell you that."

A barrier as black and as forbidding and as infinite as the Edge seemed to have risen between them. There was nothing Ketan could think of to say in the face of its widening separation of them. Elta seemed for a moment like an utter stranger. She could not be the Seeker Elta whom he had loved—with whom he would make their companionship.

"Now—?" he said.

A low, bitter sob escaped her. "Now . . . now, there is nothing. You are declassed . . . and the God only knows what more for coming here. Hoult would have killed you in Kronweld. Now he has a double excuse if you go back. They will hunt us down, even in Dark Land—

"But that is the only solution. Escape and go there. Tell me how you got in here—we'll go now, both of us. We can make it. We'll leave all this behind us and forget it for the rest of our lives—if they'll let us. You know Dark Land. Surely we can find hiding there where they can never find us."

Her eyes were upturned towards him, earnest, pleading. He shook his head.

"It wouldn't be worth it. Even if we succeeded we would condemn ourselves to lives of perpetual fear and running from those we feared to fight.

"I think there are other lands besides Dark Land and Fire Land, which no man has seen. I think that somewhere beyond them is the land of my vision, where a tall, thin pinnacle rises in a desert of red and white drifting sands. I think even that you may know where that land is. But regardless—that's

where we're going. I believe the secret of its location is in this Temple."

He had no reason for this last statement except the complete sense of clarity and correctness which flowed over him ever since he had first made the decision to enter the Temple. It was as if he were being drawn along by an invisible wire that signaled when he was making a wrong or a right move.

"I must find that pinnacle," he said, "and you shall go with me."

But Elta's eyes widened as they had the first time he mentioned it. *"You must not find it,"* she said in a voice of terror.

Ketan gazed long and steadily upon her. "You know what is there. You know where that pinnacle is."

"No! If I did I would have destroyed it long ago. I only know of the terrible things it is said to hold. Trust me—if you won't take me with you into Dark Land. Go without me. Soon I will come to you and then I promise that never will we have to live in fear again. The Temple will be destroyed, even as you wish. Then I will tell you all you want to know about me."

"I don't know how you know of these things, Elta, but if they are as fearful as you would have me believe I cannot wait for you to choose a time to tell me. I must know them now. I must find them out for myself." He shook his head slowly. "It is not I who does not trust you—you do not trust me enough to tell me what you know of the pinnacle—how you know of a thing I have only seen in vision. Tell me what you know of the old woman who came to me at the *Karildex*, why Leader Hoult would kill me if he had the chance. What is the mystery of him and Teacher Daran—and of Elta?"

She remained silent, head bowed, and unmoving.

At the opening of the Temple of Birth every inhabitant of Kronweld, without exception, gathered in the semicircle surrounding the white marble building. The guarding line of atomic devastation was broken down and armed guards were posted before the single entrance to the Temple.

Ketan remembered well the day of his own emergence. For the first time he saw the outer world and the glowing twin globes shining from the cloud-hazy sky. Somehow, he had known that it would be as it was, but still the impact of the terrible reality of the exterior world had been a physical blow.

That had been twelve *tara* before. Since that day he had

been able to remember absolutely nothing that preceded his entry into Kronweld.

Yet, deep below the conscious level in his mind was the conviction that there had been something *before*—that he had not simply sprung into existence three quarters grown as he emerged from the Temple. Something had been done to block off the things he was not meant to remember.

He recalled the things that he knew that day when he stepped out into the air and sunlight of the natural world. He knew the language. He knew the fundamentals of Seeking. He knew what kind of a society he would find himself in. He knew that he would be assigned to a house of his own as a primary learner and advance until he became a full Seeker, if he could.

That much he knew, but of the means by which he knew these things he could recall nothing.

He remembered no part of the interior of the Temple beyond that moment when he stepped through its portal. He wondered now if any of the surroundings would strike a note of familiarity within him.

The atmosphere in Preparation Center was tense. It infiltrated even into Ketan. But he had a far greater reason for anxiety than any of the girls. He felt certain that discovery would mean swift death. Surging beneath the surface of Kronweld were strange, unknown forces of which he had never conceived. Forces that were merciless and swift.

And somehow Elta was ensnared in their midst. He felt it was his destiny to destroy those forces—which loomed now even larger and more deadly than his original problem of overthrowing the system of registration for Mysteries.

A sudden, resounding blast of instruments was heard, penetrating even the thick walls of the Center. There was a flurry among the newly inducted Ladies, and Ketan found himself beside Elta in a double line before the great doors of the Center.

The chief Lady of the Center was at the head of the column, crowned with the splendor of her golden robes.

Slowly the massive doors swung outward. There was a great hush, oppressive in its solemnity, as the column began its slow march into the daylight.

There was a wide lane leading directly from the Center to the still-closed door of the Temple. Lining each side were the thousands of inhabitants of Kronweld, heads bowed in reverence before the Ladies whose very footsteps had become holy by their consecration.

Ketan felt suddenly and utterly naked. The impact of mass reverence convinced him momentarily of the fiendishness of his deception. He felt a wild urge to break and run through the vast crowd.

And there was a pounding fear in his heart lest someone look closely and recognize some familiar feature in his face. He kept his eyes averted downward, looking steadily at the heels of the woman in front of him. Elta, at his side, gripped his hand once in a gesture of tender despair.

The music softly flowing from the Temple grew louder as they approached the long broad flight of steps leading upward. At the top, the double column separated, half moving to each side of the steps, and halted there.

A thunderous blast from unseen trumpeters split the air. Then silence.

Slowly and ponderously, reluctant to break their seal upon the Temple, the massive, golden doors parted.

Ketan remembered that moment twelve *tara* before. That first crack of daylight was like a revelation from the God. Now he saw unnumbered other new inhabitants waiting impatiently, fearfully, beyond those doors. He saw the look of terror that crossed their faces, then they began to move tremblingly into the light of the twin suns.

He watched them pass between the lines of waiting Ladies. There was a terrible bravery about that moment and an intense symapthy went out from him.

They took only a few moments to pass. With an involuntary gasp, Ketan looked up through the doors. The dark hall was empty. There were no more to come out.

He looked back at the receding column. There were not more than two hundred and fifty of them.

His own gasp was re-echoed by the low murmur that began to swell from the watching group. It was a murmur of despair and wonder. Only two hundred and fifty—

Each *tara* the groups emerging seemed to become smaller and smaller, but this was the smallest of all.

Where would the reduction end? Why were there not more? No man in Kronweld knew the answers.

Now, the twin lines of the waiting Ladies turned and advanced. They converged at point in the center of the broad doorway. The doors closed.

Ketan had returned to the Temple of Birth.

11

AMID SILENCE EXCEPT FOR THE PADDING OF THEIR SOFT shoes on the marble floor, they wound slowly down a long, curving corridor whose side was shaped by the rotundity of the outer wall.

The corridor led into a small chamber heavily rugged with maroon carpet. Faint strains of music issued from unseen sources.

"I leave you now," their leader said, "to your lives of service. Dedicate your every thought and desire to the performance of your duties well, for upon you rests the future of man. I leave you now to Matra, First Lady of the Temple of Birth. Learn from her—resolve, each of you, to be as great a Lady as she has been."

The golden-robed Lady left the room. They sat in expectant silence.

Before them was a low platform with a dais in the center. Curtained alcoves marked either side.

There came a faint rustling of the curtains on the left, and then from between them emerged an old woman. Her silver hair was neatly bound with a jeweled band and her thin limbs were clad in white, shining robes.

She stood a moment glancing over their expectant faces as if with an intense hope and longing. Her eyes met Ketan's.

At that instant his world exploded.

She was the old crone who had come to the *Karildex* and told him he must slay Leader Hoult, Teacher Daran, and Elta.

He felt a current of recognition pass between them. The corners of her mouth turned slightly in an enigmatic smile, and her glance passed on.

His breath came hard and damp perspiration oozed from his pores as a sense of entrapment flooded over him.

She knew him.

He scarcely heard her begin speaking.

"—eighty *tara* I have been here. I do not regret a day that I have lost from the outer world. My only regret is that I

have not done my work well—none of us ever fulfill our dreams.

"You who once came forth from these sacred chambers must learn that it was here that the hopes and ideals and desires of the God who built Kronweld were planted within you. In turn, now you shall teach others as you were taught.

"You wonder what is required of you—you are new and hopeful, you are eager and fearful. You shall know every emotion that crosses a human breast, but sorrow and heartache you will bear in disproportionate amounts.

"It is your task first to learn the great things that have come down from the time of the first woman, and then to teach them to those who come unto us.

"All of you have wondered where life came from, how it is created. That is one of the forbidden Mysteries which Seekers in Kronweld have often been tempted to search out, but it is not wisdom that they should know. Even we who have been blessed to care for new life have not been given knowledge of how it is created. That knowledge is reserved only for the God. We see the performance of his works, but we do not comprehend how they are done.

"Tomorrow, after you have rested and refreshed yourselves, you shall witness the creation of life."

Fearful doubts began to flow through Ketan. Not a shred of evidence, not a clue to tell him that he was right. What if his beliefs and theories were a horrible blasphemy as the Council had judged?

He might never know. Matra's eyes roved over the assembled Ladies but ever they returned to him, boring into him as if trying to establish unspoken communication. Communication for what? He could not tell if her glance was one of condemnation or not.

Now a needle-sharp sadness came into her voice.

"I will not be with you long," she continued. "Perhaps you are the last group of new Ladies that I shall welcome into the Temple. If so, I give you my last command: You must do your work far better than your predecessors have done. Perhaps some of you may know it already; some of you may not. Kronweld is failing. Don't let that shock you. So slowly that you who have lived there your short lives may not have seen it Kronweld is retrograding, going into the past. No more are there great fearless Seekers like the mighty Igon who was the last of the great ones.

"Why this is so, I do not know. Nor do I know why the creation of new life is less with each *tara* that passes. The

group that I emerged with numbered over two thousand. You saw those who came forth today. You must find why this is so or Kronweld is doomed. I hope there may be one within this room who will find the reason for this.

"You may go now. An attendant for each of you is outside in the corridor. You will be shown to your rooms and tomorrow taken to the chamber of birth."

They arose, silent and somewhat shaken by the intensity of her almost inaudible speech.

Ketan turned with the group and sought the door. Elta, beside him, felt the tenseness of his body and looked inquiringly into his face.

He knew that he would not get to the door. Halfway there, he realized the ancient was speaking again. Someone plucked his sleeve and he turned.

"You who called yourself Murna—I would speak with you," Matra said.

He paused and turned. She was looking at him again with those eyes he knew could read his thoughts. Elta went on with the rest.

Then, for the first time the full realization of panic broke upon him. Matra must know that Elta was there in that room. And she had said that Elta must die.

He couldn't let her go out that door, out of his sight. Had she known that by coming to the Temple she was putting herself in the old woman's power?

There was nothing he could do. The others were beginning to look curiously at him as he stood in panic of indecision. He turned slowly and moved towards the platform with its low dais.

When they were all gone, Matra's eyes still surveyed him, boring beneath the disguise, stripping away the false plastic, baring his identity before her.

"I had not thought to see you again so soon, Ketan."

He stood still. The frozen air encased him in chill. Where had he blundered? She could not have recognized him unless she had known—

For a long instant he gazed steadily into her eyes. "I wanted to finish our conversation," he said. "You left—rather suddenly the other night."

She was taken aback momentarily. Then she smiled and shook her head. "You are lying. You did not know I was here. Tell me, why have you come?"

"I have come for the secret of life! You and all those like you have withheld the secret long enough. Man must have it,

or he will die. When I have found that secret I shall destroy you and your Temple and all that it represents."

"That is good," she said. "I was sure that you had come that far. Come closer, and sit here beside me, and I will tell you what I failed to tell you before I planned to come again to the *Karildex*. It is better that you have come here.

"It will not be necessary for you to do what I ask. When I learned you were in Preparation Center, I gave your task to another."

"You mean—?"

"Daran is already dead. Hoult—by this time tomorrow."

Revulsion engulfed him in smothering nausea. A man killed—he had not realized what it meant before, even when Elta spoke of Hoult's intent on his life. In three hundred *tara* no man had been deliberately killed in Kronweld.

Elta.

"We shall take care of Elta here," the old woman was saying. "She—"

"Why, you—!" Ketan leaped up. His hands reached for the skinny wrinkled throat. "If you touch her, I'll—"

With amazing agility, Matra sprang away from his grasp. "You fool," she raged. "What can you do?" Then she calmed. "You did not come well prepared in case your disguise was penetrated, did you, Ketan?

"But don't worry. I know how you feel. Igon— But when you have heard my story, you will have a change of mind. Listen.

"Imagine another world surrounding us on all sides, a world of people like us who could see and know of us, yet couldn't be seen. A world of which we had absolutely no knowledge.

"Such a world actually exists, Ketan. It knows of us, has known of us for more than a hundred *tara*. All the results of our Seeking are taken to that world and used for the benefit of those who will eventually destroy us. We have been permitted to live only so long as we have useful knowledge to supply to this surrounding world. Now, there is only one thing they want, our knowledge of atomic forces. So far, they have not obtained it because their emissaries among us have not been able to understand or grasp it. They are of a very low intelligence, generally.

"But now, there has come one of them into Kronweld with intelligence sufficient to take even that knowledge back. Kronweld is about to be betrayed and destruction loosed upon us.

"That emissary is Elta."

The hynotic rasping of the old woman's voice drilled itself into Ketan's mind and forged a place there that told him she was speaking the truth.

But the rest of his brain retched out the thought. Elta—! No—there was no part of him that could believe she was a member of a mythical race from a mythical world that hovered over Kronweld with death and destruction.

"I do not believe you."

"No—of course you don't—yet. But I shall show you. I shall show you in a way that you can never disbelieve! Then you shall return to Kronweld like an avenging brand to root out the festering rot of destruction that hides there. I know you, Ketan. I have what it will take to convince you.

"Until you have seen, Elta shall be spared."

Quite surely, he knew that what she said was true. She did possess whatever facts would be needed to convince him of what she said.

He was aghast at the significance of it. A world about Kronweld, she said. An invisible, spying, destructive world. And this one lone withered husk of humanity the sole agent against it.

She turned upon him suddenly. "Go to your room now. At once. You will be shown your duties by your personal guide."

He turned. Behind him, a hard, sharp-faced woman had entered and eyed him disinterestedly.

"Pardon, Matra. I thought I had lost my student."

"It is quite all right. Murna stopped to ask a question. I am pleased with her. She is earnest."

Ketan turned and followed the frozen-faced guide out the door. He looked back once, but Matra had vanished.

They turned from the large corridor into a smaller, coolly lighted passageway lined with doors. They halted before one.

"This will be yours—for the rest of your life." There was a half gloating in the woman's voice.

They entered and she indicated a closet where a supply of robes and harness were stored. "You may remove your induction robes. You'll never need them again. Most of the Ladies keep them stored for sentiment. Here are your robes for relaxing—and here are those for duty in training, for watching, and for teaching. Make yourself acquainted with the rooms.

"My name is Nelan. I'll call for you tomorrow when it is time for you to go to the chamber of birth."

She paused with her hand on the door and turned back. "What was it you asked Matra?"

Ketan turned sharply to the impudent guide. Did she know, too? "Nothing that concerns you," he said.

"I only want to help. Matra is old. She will not be with us long. Then when she is gone we will have a glorious new ruler under Anetel. There are many things you must learn," she added meaningly. "I only want to help."

Her gaze lingered upon him. She turned abruptly and was gone.

Ketan was left with an undefined sense of conflicting forces within the Temple itself as he gazed at the closed door. The guide, Nelan, had exhibited an unmistakable antagonism towards Matra.

He shrugged it off. There were other problems, too important for him to concern himself with petty schisms in the Temple organization. He sank deeply in a soft chair and uncoiled the tenseness that pervaded every muscle of his body. The lack of sleep and the bewildering forces he had perceived swirling in intangible patterns about him and about all mankind during the past three days had drained his energies.

The chair was equipped with both entertainment and refreshment panels. He selected light food and drink which swung out on a shining tray and elevated to the proper level before him. He wondered what the food was as he tasted it. New and untried foods had long ago ceased to surprise him since the Food Center produced a new creation regularly every tenth of a *tara.* This was exceptionally good, however. If he had been outside the Temple, he would have been moved to recommend that it be rated a permanent item. If it did not obtain enough recommendations, it would be abandoned forever and the Center would go on to new and endless creations.

He inspected the titles of music on the other panel and noted with a start that many of them had been produced in Kronweld only recently. That meant there was regular exchange between the Temple and the city, even as was implied by the visit of Matra to the *Karildex.*

Music began to flow into the room as he made a selection. He settled his body lower in the chair and abandoned his mind to idle scrutiny of the compartment.

It was designed with the ultimate of luxury that the skills of Kronweld were capable of producing. No Seeker on the Council itself, or in the First Group could obtain more of comfort and expensive surroundings than Ketan found himself in possession of.

There were no natural windows, of course, but compact

energizers threw a sheet of luminous air against the ceiling and spread a soft, compelling glow over the compartment. Ketan reached out and turned the control switch. The glow slowly shifted from its restful cream to a cool green and through a quiet blue to violent red and crimson shades. He brought it back to light green and lay back in the chair.

How long he slept he didn't know. But when he awoke he was refreshed though stiff in his back and shoulders.

He rose and shifted the lights to bright blue-white glowing. He shrugged out of the induction robes he still wore, with a grotesquely unfeminine motion. Across the room the reflector surface gave him back the image of his woman form.

He grimaced but stepped closer to inspect his job of sculptoring and see if the plastic were holding up. He inspected his face and was thankful that he had submitted early to permanent removal of his facial hair. Without such, his disguise would surely have been hopeless.

Most of the men of Kronweld welcomed the removal, but occasionally some Seeker retained it as a curious mark of distinction—or perversion.

Assured that his sculptoring was still intact, he searched for the spray room and was about to step under the shower of chemical cleanser and invigorator when he looked down at his body and laughed aloud. A lot of invigorating he would get from spraying the layer of plastic. He stepped in from force of habit and was surprised to find how much actually penetrated the porous material.

He stepped out and dried before the warm flow of air that fanned over him. He dressed then in the robes the guide had indicated would be proper for the day and sat down at the larger refreshment panel for a full and more diverse meal.

His mind still refused to register any definite familiarity with the surroundings. Yet there began to be insistent tuggings as if from a dream that could not be recalled.

And somehow, these tuggings of mind centered about the ancient, Matra. He knew he had never seen her before in his life—as far as he could remember—except for the night at the *Karildex*. But the image of her face drew him more persistently each moment.

Probably he had seen her before he had emerged into Kronweld. Perhaps some strange bond had been established between them. It seemed fantastic, but so did her conversation of the day before. So did everything that had occurred since he met her that night alone.

Sudden chimings of a hidden bell startled him as he ate. Then a voice spoke from the same unseen source.

"The new section of Ladies will assemble in the corridor at once, prepared for admission to the chamber of birth."

He hurriedly gulped the remainder of his food, adjusted his garb to what he presumed was the proper fit and brushed his hair smooth.

He opened the door and stepped out.

Already, most of the others were at attention before the doors of their compartments. Nelan was waiting for him. She offered a nod of expressionless greeting and remained silent. A column of marching Ladies was advancing down the hall. As they passed, each pair standing by the doors joined them.

Ketan could not quell the pounding within his chest nor the flush that suffused his features. The climax of his *tara* for Seeking and hoping was about to come. He was to learn the truth of the secrets he had sought for so many *tara*—to witness at last the creation of life.

But there was more than excitement. There was dismay and fear mingled in his emotions. Every sign, every indication pointed to something far different from the thing he had imagined the creation of life to be.

He had seen no sign of a single man being present in the Temple except himself. How, then, did life come into being? Had some incredible means been produced by Seeking to accomplish it by other factors?

The column came abreast of him. He and Nelan joined in. Her eyes searched anxiously for Elta. He had not discovered where her assigned compartment was. Now he saw her a dozen doors ahead of him. She looked slim and deceptively fragile in the robes she now wore. They were more drab than the induction robes, but they seemed to heighten, rather than decrease the loveliness of her.

His hungry eyes tried to attract her glance, but she did not see him as she and her companion went to the rear of the column.

They wound through labyrinthine halls. Once, he caught the sound of a pain cry far away, and all eyes turned towards it momentarily—and forgot it. But something hard congealed within Ketan.

He remembered the creation of new life by the Bors—

Abruptly, they came to a dead end. They halted while a guide pressed a lock button. Thick, ponderous doors slid aside with reluctant inertia. Ketan puzzled at the massive con-

struction. As he passed through, he saw they were more than half his height in thickness.

With fearful expectancy the new Ladies gazed into the chamber revealed before them.

Dull green glow illumined the utter barrenness of the place. There was only dead, stifling silence.

The chamber was shaped like a quarter of a sphere in miniature of the Temple itself. Ketan sensed that they were at the very core of the building.

But there was nothing within the chmber. No—his eyes adjusted to the dim glow and he saw two figures silent and statuesque seated before a niche in the flat wall.

The niche was a shallow, semicircular opening no higher than a man. Dark shadows lay in its depths. The two immobile girls did not turn nor glance about. Their staring gaze remained firmly fixed upon the niche.

There was one other figure within the room. It stood motionless and alone in the exact center, watching the group. It was Matra. Her eyes seemed to glow out from the depths of her shrunken face with more brightness than the dull illumination of the chamber.

With a jerky motion of her arm she thrust a finger out straight and pointed to a low marble bench at the back, curved wall of the room, facing the waiters who sat before the niche.

They filed slowly to their place, hardly breathing to break the stillness. They sat down and there was—nothing.

Ketan's mind spun upon its own axis in turmoil, but it could get no grip on any factor of the surroundings. He did not know what he had expected to see. Vague visions of a superb and glistening Seeker's laboratory greater than his own hidden workshop had been in the back of his mind. But this—this barren chamber. What could it have to do with the creation of life?

There was nothing but silence, a queer suspension of life within that chamber, as if the whole energies of life had paused to gather their forces for some colossal demonstration.

Ketan felt it. He knew the others sensed it too, a tangible, physical demonstration. But what it was, he could not guess.

He was almost in the center of the arc of the bench. He could peer into the depths of the niche, but there was nothing to see.

There was nothing—only waiting.

The girls shifted uneasily as their muscles began to cramp and ache from the rigidity of their posture on the uncomfort-

able stone bench. But the two watchers before the niche had never moved since the group entered, though they sat on tiny stone pillars, backless and formless.

There was a low chuckling that filled the room like an eerie faraway screeching. They looked about. Matra was trembling with her own bitter humor.

"You'll learn patience, my Ladies. There will be days when you will sit alone with endless wonder and pray to the God that he will send new life, that Kronweld has not yet come to its end. But that end will come—unless you find a way to prevent it. Half the halls and chambers of this Temple are barren and unused. They have not been opened for more *tara* than half the Ladies of the Temple can remember. Learn patience, my Ladies.

"Perhaps it will be one of you who waits at the last in this chamber before the dust grows thick and the doors are sealed forever because the God withholds life!"

A chill trembled in the air and settled upon them. The scent of death was an astringent upon their souls.

They sat in wonder and dismay, hopeful at first for some strange miracle to take place before their eyes, watching the mysterious niche with straining gaze.

Then, at last, aching and weary, they began to pray that the useless vigil might end and they be allowed to go back to their compartments.

Ketan, perhaps, was the first to see it.

He stared with hypnotic attention into the black depths of the niche. But those depths were no longer black. With a pulsing like that of the night sky there was a sudden flame of color. Violent, tearing, purple light that flashed over the walls of the chamber in hideous garishness.

It died slowly, and when it was gone they could not see. Then it rose again, swimming up from the depths of the spectrum below the infrared, bursting through a crescendo of light to blind them with radiation beyond the violet.

The two watchers had leaped to their feet, shielding their eyes, and stood tensely before the chaotic display. Ketan stole a half blinded glance at Matra. Even she was trembling visibly at the phenomenon. He wondered what cataclysm was upon them.

One of the new girls screamed.

And suddenly the flame split. In its center was blackness. The blackness spread, and they felt as if unseen hands had grasped the entire chamber twisting and turning it—

The end came suddenly. The flame exploded into blackness

and the twisting, tearing hands restored the chamber to a dully lit room full of terrified and crying Ladies.

But the two watchers and Matra were huddled about the little platform before the niche. A new sound rose, a tiny crying sound that echoed the fear and terror that filled the chamber of birth.

One of the watchers turned. In her arms was a tiny, squirming animal form. Slowly, like a dream of vast terror, realization broke upon their minds. That form was a diminutive human being. They had witnessed the creation of life.

12

"HUMAN LIFE IS HELPLESS AT ITS CREATION," THE LECTURER said. "It cannot feed or walk or make any but involuntary movements. It has no intelligent means of communication."

The group sat in a lecture hall following the experiences in the chamber of birth. The faces of the girls about him showed Ketan the effect of the shock they had received. Three of them had fainted at the horrible ugliness of the tiny animal on finally realizing that it was a human being. The rest had turned pale and sick with uncomprehension. He doubted that many of them actually believed that they had once looked like that.

The buxom lecturer held up a plastic model of the infant man. "There is, fortunately, one function of which all are created capable. That is the ability to take food when properly presented. For this we use a special device. It is a bottle filled with liquid food and fitted with a flexible tip in which is a small hole. An automatic motion of the infant's lips can draw the liquid through the hole. In this manner life is preserved until more efficient intake can be accomplished. Is there any question?"

There was none. A dull insensibility had settled upon the minds of most members of the group, which would not be dispelled for days.

"That is all for today, then," said the lecturer. "You will proceed to the next compartment where the successive stage of development will be demonstrated."

From a wide doorway they were shown the room in which

tara-old beings were learning to walk. The Ladies could not refrain from breaking out in unrestrained laughter at the grotesque actions of the little men and women.

But after a moment's laughter, something halted them. They looked down upon the helpless creatures and a sense of compassion filled them. Even Ketan felt it extending from him towards the tiny, misshapen beings who would some day grow into perfection.

The instructor nodded with approval and smiled as the girls advanced hesitantly towards the babies and gave them a hand.

From there they passed on to other compartments where larger children were engaged in learning to use their arms and legs and develop skills. In others, they were learning language and the fundamentals of Seeking. On the top level of the Temple were those who were prepared to leave and emerge into Kronweld the next *tara*.

There, it was explained to them how a means of influencing the memories of those who emerged was accomplished through memory domination. This was done to preserve the secrets of the Temple and its sanctity among the inhabitants of Kronweld.

Surging, whipping tentacles of memory tried to find a grip amid these scenes, but all memory of having passed through these stages of existence were only wistful shadows in Ketan's mind.

Alone, in his compartment at the end of the day's tour through the Temple, Ketan knew he was no nearer the solution of the Mystery of the Temple than when he had first emerged from it himself.

For a time the strange baffling forces he had witnessed in the chamber of birth had confused him. Now he saw clearly that they were only the mask to a still deeper mystery. Life was not created by those flaming fires. Such a thing was a grotesque farce.

Where, then, did the creation of life take place? How could life even be present in the midst of those flaming lights? Was all he had seen merely a half knowledge which was reserved for the newest Ladies while the older ones were partakers of greater Mysteries?

He determined that there was one way only of finding out. That was from Matra. He felt confident that she would ask him to come to her again. And when she did he would find

the answer to these questions if he had to choke it out of her skinny throat with his own hands.

He wished he could see Elta and talk with her. He was more than ever puzzled by her deliberate coming here. He could see no purpose in it, especially when she knew of Matra's enmity towards her. It was conceivable that she had come to attempt an understanding with Matra, but again Ketan was baffled by a stone wall of ignorance. What understanding was necessary between them?

Who were the Statists?

Ketan's guide, Nelan, was more a guardian than a guide, it seemed to Ketan. She attached herself to him as soon as he left his compartment and left him only as he returned to it. He was sure her duties did not call for this close observation. He noticed, however, that many of the others were treating their student Ladies similarly.

She spoke at midday meal several days later. "Are you growing accustomed to your life with us?" Her attempt at a friendly smile was grotesque.

"I like it," Ketan lied. "It's the most sacred life a woman could live."

"You are right." Nelan nodded. And Ketan noticed now that there were a half dozen others crowded around as if assenting.

"But that proves one thing," Nelan went on. "Our position should entitle us to the best of the possible compensations in life. We deserve many of the comforts and liberties of life that we could enjoy here but don't have. It should be our right to possess them."

"That's right," another, older woman nodded. "Matra has never cared much about us having conveniences and comforts in our lives. She always insisted so much on devotion to duty that we had scarcely time to live."

"Devotion to duty is our primary objective in life," Nelan pointed out solemnly. "But we have a right to ask for those things that we deserve. There is a sure way to get them."

Ketan wondered what more they could want. There was more luxury of living in the Temple than he had ever dreamed of in his own social status in Kronweld. He wondered where all this was leading to.

"We need your help, the help of all you younger Ladies," someone else spoke directly to Ketan. "Anetel will get them for us if we support her."

"What are you talking about?" Ketan demanded.

"Matra is old," Nelan said. "She will soon die. One of us will have to be prepared to take her place. Her successor will be chosen by common consent. Most of us have decided in favor of Anetel. She is the natural one for the place. She will build a new era of progress for the Temple of Birth. The new born will emerge into Kronweld far more capable of taking their proper places there.

"And Anetel will see that conditions within the Temple—among the ranks of the Ladies—will be greatly improved. We will have better living quarters, more freedom to enjoy our existence and compensate for the things we have given up. Doesn't that sound desirable?"

Ketan nodded. "Very desirable."

They smiled upon him. "Then you will assist us in supporting Anetel?"

"Yes."

They smiled more and remained with him throughout the meal.

Idealism.

The word churned bitterly in Ketan's mind. So this was the holy, sacred Temple of Birth—and these were the unselfish, sacrificing, sacrosanct Ladies who devoted their lives to the high things of existence. These petty, mean-minded old women who harped about in cliques groveling for the minor advantages of prestige and rights within the Temple.

Ketan wondered what the starry-eyed girls thought now—those who had listened so raptly in Preparation Center. They probably grew hardened as the *tara* passed.

But gone was any sympathy he had momentarily possessed or any doubts he had held about desecrating the place.

Ketan had never spoken to Anetel directly. He had seen her only as he passed in the halls and corridors.

She was tall and blonde and stately, with finespun golden hair. Her skill with the new born was unmatched. Her apparent coldness at a distance was deceptive. In direct speech—which was as frequent as necessary, and no more—her personality was like liquid warmth flowing over her listener. She put at ease the most timid of the Ladies when she chose to speak to them. Those repelled by the lined and shrunken features of Matra were easily nurtured by Anetel's presence.

She was not small and insinuating, nor was she powerful and brusque. She did not gather with any of the small groups that collected about the halls and rooms when the duties of the day were over. She did not fawn over the new arrivals.

She defied Ketan's analysis.

He hated her on sight.

He knew the words spoken by the campaigning lieutenants in the hall were words they had first heard spoken in private by Anetel. He knew she was acutely aware of every Lady in the Temple and studiously distributed her agents where their propaganda would do the most good.

More than often, he wondered why Matra failed to do something about it. The Temple personnel was a shambles. Matra could not help knowing it.

Perhaps she had simply reached the end of her power.

But when he thought of those deep, hypnotic eyes and remembered her before the keyboards of the *Karildex* he did not believe that.

For seemingly endless days, though actually they were not many, Ketan and Elta and the rest of the new Ladies learned their routine duties of caring for the developing human beings.

Ketan found it strangely amusing to care for the newest ones, assisting them in their feeding and their more repulsive personal needs. He thought of Teacher Daran and the others he had known at the House of Wisdom walking in and recognizing him at these duties.

Then he remembered that Teacher Daran had been killed —killed by the forces that ruled this Temple in the hands of Matra—

He knew he had but little longer to stay. He had to reach a decision and act soon, for his disguise was wearing. The plastic was not substantial before the daily twisting and friction to which his body subjected it. Each night he had to soften it a bit with hot water and remold it. He wondered curiously if some of the Ladies didn't notice a strange day-to-day metamorphosis in him.

He had long ago made his final decision with regard to the Temple. It awaited only his assignment to a watcher's post in the chamber of birth.

In that chamber lay the solution to the whole Mystery of the Temple.

He thought himself calm, but the day his assignment came his breath quickened and his pulses leaped. He felt that at last he stood on the threshold of a solution.

He wondered who his companion on the watch would be. It was too much to hope that it would be Elta. He hoped for someone who'd not interfere with his investigations. But he'd

find out what he'd come for if he had to kill the other watcher to keep her quiet.

It was Elta.

She stood at the entrance to the chamber and looked unbelievingly at him. She half turned as if to escape.

"Elta—" he whispered, "this is more than I could have hoped for."

Her form seemed to sag wearily. "Why did it have to be you?"

"Elta! Aren't you glad that we can be alone together for a time?"

"No—listen to me, Ketan." Her voice was anguished now. "I came here to do a certain thing. Will you trust—this time?

"Perhaps I can do all that you want done—the destruction of the Temple. But you must leave me alone here. Go out of the chamber. Go back to your room. You can get there without being seen. When I have finished, I will come back to you. We can fight our way out for I have discovered where many Dark Land Weapons are hidden. Will you do this for me?"

"No."

"Ketan—"

"No, Elta. I'll not leave you to go ahead with whatever mad plan you have. Why you ever came here, I cannot guess —but I have my own purposes and they are more important than anything you may have planned."

"I have spoken with Matra. She approved—"

Ketan stared at her. What could he believe? Matra had passed lethal judgment on Elta's life. How could she approve any plan of Elta's which might involve destruction of the Temple? What was Elta trying to do?

"I can't believe that," he said. "I don't think destruction of the Temple is possible without first learning the secrets of this chamber. How is life created within those fires that flame up in the niche? What is their secret? I intend to find out."

"Those are the forbidden things of Kronweld," Elta murmured. "No man is meant to know them. No one within the Temple knows them. Do not tamper with forces beyond man's understanding."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. Why have you become so cautious? It was not that way when you first worked within the ranks of the Unregistereds, helping me to organize them."

"Perhaps I have come to realize there are forces beyond man's strength to combat. Forces not worth combating because they mean only battering heads against stone walls and slowly

washing away life's energies and chances for happiness. Leave me now, Ketan. I will come back to you quickly."

"No."

Never, in all their association, had he felt so far distant from her as he did now in the small, unholy chamber in the depths of the Temple.

Why did she want him to leave her alone in this place?

It frightened him. He had a sudden glimpse of what life would be without her. It was like looking over the edge of a deep black chasm. It left him panicky and he drew back from the thought.

She was standing in front of the niche, staring into its depths. He had an impulse to grasp her in his arms and attempt to crush out the bleak mysteries that thrust between them like ice curtains.

It was in vain. These things could not be swept aside by a single embrace. They were only branches of the deep-rooted faults buried deep in the society of Kronweld.

He strode about the dull, bare chamber and examined it minutely. There was nothing but blank walls of formed stone.

The niche itself was just as barren.

He crawled into it.

Elta screamed a terrified cry. "Ketan—!"

The shimmering violet glow was rising in the depths of the niche. For an instant it seemed to engulf Ketan, and his body took on a terrible transparency.

He leaped from the platform back into the chamber. His face was white and he was shaking uncontrollably. "Elta, I—"

"Look. Here it comes."

The white fire was leaping at them, splitting into utter darkness. Before his eyes he thrust up a veil of the robe he wore and stared into the incandescence.

Then it was over, and on the platform a squealing infant human lay.

Elta lifted it in her arms. "Ring the alarm," she said dully.

"Wait . . . there is something—"

A strange white strip was wrapped about the infant's leg. Ketan unwound it and exposed a deep-cut injury. And a loose crumpled sheet fluttered to the floor. He picked it up.

"It looks like a message—" He laughed a little shakily at the incredibility of the idea.

Elta glanced hastily at it. "Destroy it. Quickly, Ketan. Someone might come in and see us with it. I'm afraid—"

He looked up from the sheet of paper into her eyes. "Did

you look deep into the light when it came at the time of birth? Did you see a kind of vision in it?"

"No, we were warned—"

"We were warned not to see what they don't want us to see. When that first wave of light engulfed me it seemed as if this chamber vanished and I was flung for a moment into another faraway world. There was a great assembly of people in a hall greater than this whole Temple. I stood before them at the base of a great machine and they looked up at me with fear and pleading in their eyes. They were crying out to me to come to them—to save them."

Elta turned away and would not meet his gaze. "It must have been an illusion."

"No, I saw it—and I shall see it again. Next time I shall walk towards it. I shall go through it. I shall find that great hall and the crying, pleading people—"

13

HE DID NOT SLEEP THAT NIGHT. AS SOON AS HE WAS FREE TO go to his compartment, he locked himself in and took out the sheet that he had found on the baby in the chamber.

It was too fantastic to believe that this was an actual message.

Yet, why not?

The inescapable logic of his Seeking told him that the infants that were created amid the flames in the chamber must have had natural parentage somewhere, sometime.

Was it the great hall filled with people who had looked to him for salvation? Their eyes stared at him millionfold when he tried to close his own eyes and not think of them.

It did not take him long to decipher the characters with doubtful meaning. If it were correct, it was a terrible meaning. Not the words themselves, but it became the voice of that visioned concourse of people.

It said: "If any of you live, come through to us. Save us. Bring weapons."

That puzzled him most—the words he had translated as "weapon." Weapon was a guard. It had only two meanings, either referring to a Serviceman or to a protective ring such as

surrounded the Temple of Birth, preventing trespassing from Kronweld.

Explorers in the Dark Land had devised an adaption of the principle of the protective ring which would kill Bors and other animals at a considerable distance. It was such a weapon to which Elta had referred earlier.

If he had translated correctly, the message asked for such a weapon.

The translation, such as it was, had not been hard because the characters appeared to be no more than twisted distortions of Kronweld characters, and a few unknown additions. It was a strange language.

While he stared in contemplation at it, a thin needle of sound leaped into being in the depths of the night.

It sped in echoing resounding through the great halls and long corridors and pierced every sleeping ear. It became a scream of death and terror that cried through the Temple and awoke every being.

Ketan ran into the hall to find it lined with terrified Ladies, scanty and sheer in night apparel.

Before he could even press through the hall and find the origin of the cry, they were being herded back by the forceful minions of the Temple. Adherents of Anetel—Ketan recognized them.

"What happened?" He added his voice to the babble, and it was lost. No one knew where the scream had come from.

The Ladies pressed forward, taxing the staff that tried to herd them back. Then for a moment the pressing surge relaxed while eyes stared expectantly down the corridor. More of Anetel's guards came from the other end and the press in the hall began to move slowly back.

Then slowly, down the line, so spontaneous that no one knew who brought the information, passed the deadly rumor: "Someone tried to kill Anetel . . . stabbed with a knife . . . ran through the hall with it sticking in her back . . . one of the new girls did it . . . no one knows her name—

"It was Elta, her name was—"

Ketan's mind groaned under the weight of that statement and refused to accept it. It came down the line again—and again—Elta tried to kill Anetel. They were all whispering it—a crazy new girl—got in a fight with Anetel—tried to kill her—was she dead yet? Elta was her name.

Ketan went back into his room and closed the door. What could have happened, he asked himself over and over again.

He threw himself in a chair and held himself perfectly still for the space of a hundred heartbeats.

There was nothing he could do to assist Elta yet, if it were true that she had tried to kill Anetel.

But why should she do such an insane thing? *That* could not be the purpose for which she had come to the Temple.

He must not reveal himself sooner than necessary. He forced himself into semicalmness until the furor in the hall died down. He must wait until morning to obtain the available information. There would be time enough to act then. There must be— He must hold himself in abeyance until then.

He did not know whether or not he finally slept, or how long he sat there. He was only aware next of a voice within the room calling out— It whispered suddenly and low and unintelligibly. He twisted his head. There it was again. He spotted the source—an apparently blank space on the wall. He listened, holding his breath.

It came again, as if in an agony of death. It was the voice of Matra.

"Ketan . . . Ketan . . . answer if you can hear me. Ketan—"

"I hear. Where are you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"My room. Come to me at once. Watch. See that you are not discovered. Come—" The voice trailed to inaudibility.

Swiftly, full awake now, Ketan crept to the door, opened it a crack. The hall had long been cleared, and the Ladies of the Temple restored to troubled, fretful sleep.

But one of them—undoubtedly a cohort of Anetel—was patrolling the far end of the corridor. He saw her disappearing back as she turned a corner.

He raced out and down the hall on tiptoe. He kept his head turned, almost running backwards to keep an eye on the far end. He saw the foot of the slow-moving guard appear beyond the corner again and flattened himself in a shallow doorway. It was far from deep enough to hide him.

He flattened the side of his face against the door and watched the guard with one eye. His breath sucked in sharply as she stared down the hall towards him.

He thought in that instant of Matra. Why had the old woman called him at this time? Could it be that she was dying?

The thought set his pulses pounding. He had to hear the rest of her story before—

The guard had stopped now and was peering down the hall. He drew himself inward and literally willed himself flatter.

Then slowly she turned, satisfied that all was well. He held

his breath as she retreated and finally disappeared out of sight around the corner.

Matra's simple quarters were at the end of the hall, facing the opening into the great main assembly room of the Temple. Ketan leaped from the shallow hiding in the doorway and raced once more along the hall. He hesitated before Matra's door. The hall was clear. He burst in.

For a moment he thought the room was empty, until his eyes became accustomed to the half darkness. Then a small, almost inaudible voice spoke his name. It came from a deep bed in the far corner of the room.

Matra was there. Only her face appeared and her hands clutching the edge of the coverlets. They looked like fallen leaves.

"I'm glad you came . . . in time—" she uttered with an extreme exertion. "I am dying, and there are things I must tell you."

"Is there anything I can get?" Ketan asked softly. "Anything to ease your going?"

"To make it quicker? That is what you mean, isn't it? You mean to be kind," she said queerly. "But no, I must talk as long as there is life left in me.

"First, I must tell you of Elta. I was wrong about her. She came to me today, and I was wrong. Be good to her, Ketan. She loves you. I talked long with her. I showed her what the Statists have done to Kronweld and to Earth . . . you do not know that name, do you? She believed me and she will help you."

A contortion of pain gripped the withered countenance and twisted it almost beyond recognition. Ketan sat hopelessly while the spasm passed.

"The poison—works swiftly," Matra groaned.

"Poison!"

Matra nodded. "Anetel did it. I should have known. But it does not matter. You shall carry on. I must hurry . . . the end is near. I want you to take this ring—"

She slipped a ring from her hand and passed it over. Ketan took it wonderingly. It barely fitted his little finger.

"Keep that. It will protect you from the evil that Anetel plans for you. Yes . . . she knows you. You have been known from the first moment you entered the Preparation Center. It is not that easy to gain access to the Temple of Birth," she smiled grimly. "We both knew you and each of us thought to use you for our own purposes. In that, I have won.

"I fear my time is short." Another grimace of pain crossed

the weathered face. "Elta knows what to do. She will tell you the rest. I wanted you to know that she is innocent of any harm."

"But why did she try to kill Anetel?"

"She . . . did . . . that?" The crone tried to rise in bed and sank back with a groan. "Oh the fool . . . the little fool . . . the wonderful little fool—"

"Why?"

"She thought to help. But it will be of no avail. We have the situation under control— But you say she *tried?*"

"I am not certain of anything—only what is rumored in the Temple. Anetel's minions are keeping the corridors cleared."

"Yes . . . she has had her own organization among us for a long time. I have watched her build it up. But it does not matter. I have my own, too, and we have prevented her from sending any important information out of here."

Quick pain now embraced the husk of Matra, pain that would not leave. It twisted her face and clouded her eyes until she shut them and wide pools of liquid formed in their corners, pools that widened and at last burst and flooded down the canyons of her face like overflowing reservoirs.

"This is it," she gurgled through the pain. "There was so much more I had to tell you. But Elta . . . she knows all of it. See that she has her ring . . . it may be necessary for her, too. Do not lose them, either of you. Now . . . God bless you!"

Her body twitched, her throat noised horribly—and she lay still.

For a long time Ketan knelt beside the body, uncomprehending, unable to move a muscle. He stared down in utter bewilderment and wonder. And a terrible sense of alien forces and powers over him came with the realization that it was not the God referred to by Nabah and his followers to whom Matra had called out for blessings upon him.

He gazed down upon the tired little body. What burdens it had carried during the infinite *tara* it had existed! Now, already, disintegration had set in. Probably no man would ever know what those burdens were.

He rose abruptly, conscious once more of his own position and the peril of Elta. He looked at the curious ring that Matra had given him. It was only a shining golden band. And Elta had one like it. How could powers of salvation exist in the tiny, impotent-looking thing?

The hall was still deserted as he stepped back into it.

Not even the guard was in sight. He returned quickly to his own room without incident and sat down in the deep chair.

The death of Matra had shaken him. There was nothing so repellent as witnessing death. In Kronweld, those who escorted incurables to the Place of Dying were themselves pariahs, and only the lowest of the declassed could be forced into the job. Death was abhorrent.

Yet, he recalled, there had been a curious peacefulness and serenity about Matra. She was not afraid. She appeared to almost welcome death. She regretted only that the terrible wrestling forces about her had not reached satsifactory equilibrium. Ketan felt an irrational obligation to the dead woman, an obligation to carry on her work even as she had implied—whatever her work was.

But the thought of Elta tormented him. Why had she tried to kill Anetel? The petty internal affairs of the Temple did not concern her. It was the entire structure that had to be destroyed.

He strove in vain to conceive a logical plan of reaching Elta.

They came in upon him while he sat there.

14

ANETEL WAS FOREMOST. THREE OF HER FOLLOWERS WERE behind her.

Ketan leaped up. Anetel's eyes flashed insolence at him. A satirical smile played about her lips. One arm was suspended in a sling and thickly bandaged. Someone *had* stabbed her—

"You might as well remove that piece of plastic from your nose. It's about to fall off."

"I've grown rather accustomed to it."

"As you will. What a fool you must have been to think you could come in here without detection—and deceive Anetel. I have every record that Matra made of your attack upon the girl at the Preparation Center. Your words with Matra. Your amusing sculptoring each morning. And your desecration in the chamber of birth.

"I want that message! Give it to me."

She held out her hand imperiously.

Ketan leaped backwards to the original and his translation which lay on the table behind him. He flung them into the open waste disposal chute in the wall.

"That is just as well," said Anetel. "I just didn't want it lying around where curious Ladies might wonder about it. We have to remove Ladies who succeed in translating them."

"There have been others?"

"Many of them. That's why you are warned not to examine the babies, but bring them quickly to the reception chamber. But in any case it would have been necessary to sentence you."

He gazed straight into her arrogant face. "And what does that mean?"

"I'm surprised," she mocked. "You were such a great Seeker in Kronweld. You would tear down and destroy this false Temple and replace it with truth. Have you never heard the truth of the Temple and the great door in the Edge?"

Ketan looked puzzled. Anetel laughed. Then amazement flooded over him. That blackness in the niche!

What a fool he had been not to realize it before. That was the Edge itself.

"I recall from your history," said Anetel, "that in your youth you proposed that Seekers find a way to pass through or over the Edge and discover what was on the other side. Well, you shall find out!"

"What do you mean?"

"Hundreds of *tara* in the past, there was a great battle in Kronweld. There were thousands of ignorant primitives who opposed the Seekers. They said that Seeking was against the will of the God and they slew hundreds of our noblest Seekers. But in the end they were defeated and a great Seeker whose very name is now forgotten discovered how to build a gate in the Edge which would open upon a bleak and terrible prison world on the other side. A world that would make Fire Land and Dark Land look as if they were gardens of paradise. He built this gate and the defeated ignorants were imprisoned in this land. It is an eternal land. One in which none ever die and they are there to this day."

A sudden, haunting vision grew up before Ketan's eyes—a mighty assemblage of pleading faces. His own face betrayed his emotion.

"Ah—you have seen them, then," Anetel laughed. "And by your face I see that you pity them. Pity yourself, poor Seeker, for you shall join them and your face shall be one of

those to stare and haunt the curious Ladies who shall try to penetrate the secret of life in the future—until they also shall join you."

"You can't believe me so stupid as to believe a fantastic lie as that. Why should nothing be known in Kronweld of this? And where does new life come from? Your tale hardly explains that."

"That—? That was another triumph of the same Seeker who opened the Edge. If it is any consolation, you may know that you were right in your theories of the creation of life. We come into being in the same horrible manner as the Bors whose association you found so desirable. But the people of Kronweld have been spared this horror. It is the creation of the imprisoned ones who are drawn through the Edge to replenish Kronweld. They are the animals which breed us. The infants alone can come through. The others can go only from here to there."

Ketan stood aghast. As abhorrent as her story was, it would explain everything if it were true. Everything about the Temple was fantastic, unreal, yet each incredible revelation seemed to bring him nearer the truth.

"You will be sentenced today," Anetel said. She turned to leave.

Ketan leaped swiftly after her. Instinctively, she whirled aside and her one free hand snapped out from beneath her robe.

"I think you know what this it," she said.

Ketan glanced at the object in her hand. It was a Dark Land weapon—capable of reducing him to a breath of ash in an instant.

Then as Anetel caught sight of him standing immobile there the flash of the golden ring on his finger struck her eye.

It seemed to sober her.

"So Matra thought to outwit me even as she died," Anetel murmured. "Give me that ring."

Her eyes were hard gems of utter coldness beyond human comprehension. Ketan handed the ring over instantly.

He knew it was either that or let her flame him.

"Good," she said, pocketing the ring with a quick motion. "Now, Elta undoubtedly has one, too. I must get hers."

They sealed the door when they left. Ketan stared dumbly at it. Idly, he glanced down at the barren finger. There was no escape now. But he had at last found the secret of the Temple. He would be sent to the exile beyond the Edge.

A fantastic exultation swept through him. What did his own life matter if he proved his Seeking?

And somehow, somewhere—if he still lived—he would find a way back. Elta was his only worry. What would become of her?

At that moment a voice spoke within the room. "Ketan . . . Ketan! Can you hear me? Speak if you hear me."

"Elta! Where are you?"

"I escaped from my confinement and found the communication center of the Temple. I'm speaking to you by it. I can hear anything that is spoken in your room. Listen to me, Ketan. I know what they plan to do to you. I have stolen one of the Dark Land weapons and I can get another. I have a disguise and will hide in the chamber of birth. I'll be one of the watchers there. I will hide one of the weapons just inside the niche. Let them lead you up to it and then take the weapon and we'll fight our way out."

"No, Elta! That is impossible—we'd have to slay everyone in the Temple. And then where would we go? All Kronweld would be waiting for us outside, for I know there is communication with the outside."

"We must! There is no time to lose."

"Put the weapon in the niche as you planned. When I go through, follow me."

"No!"

"That's what you came for, isn't it?"

"Yes . . . yes, but—"

"We'll find the way back. You know what is on the other side, but I don't, and it will be the realization of dreams for me. And I will prove to you that whatever it is you are afraid of is no cause for fear. Now, do as I say, Elta."

"All right. I'm a fool, but it's only because I love you. Have your weapon ready to use the instant the flames begin. You must kill quickly when you get through."

The chamber of birth was tomblike as sentence was passed upon Ketan. He stood silent and waiting before the ebon sheet of the exposed Edge.

Behind him, white-robed Ladies of the Temple stood like attendant ghosts.

He did not give a betraying glance at the watchers post where Elta sat. He wondered how she had succeeded in escaping. Her presence gave him a sense of satisfaction and comfort for he knew that no dangers they could be going into could match the danger to Elta here in the Temple.

Behind him he now observed two burly Ladies with long padded poles. These were for use in case he became reluctant to walk into the flames. And still farther back was Anetel with her waiting Dark Land weapon in case the two assistants failed.

Ketan was still clad in his plastic disguise and Anetel had ironically ordered him to clothe in the induction robes with which he had entered the Temple. "A new induction awaits you," she had said.

Now they waited. He hoped it would not be long. But he well knew that it might be days even, before another infant appeared amid the flaming opening of the gateway.

It was coming!

The flickering purple shadows crossed the ebony sheet in the depths of the niche. A low cry came from the assembled Ladies. Ketan glanced towards the spot where Elta's promised weapon was to be.

There was nothing there.

He stared in dismay.

The purple was becoming red. A wave of deep, blasting heat swept momentarily over him. Then it was gone. The light rose through the spectrum and flamed white and became edged with blue.

He hesitated and turned. There was a vicious jab in the small of his back that cramped him with pain. It drove him forward into the blue-white flames.

His backward glance took in the watchers post. Neither of them was Elta.

He did not have time to comprehend the catastrophe of this. The poles jabbed the small of his back in sickening pain. Then he was running down a long corridor of twisting, writhing flames that flung his body about and tore at him with tangible fingers of fire.

They stared up at him as if time had stopped for them eons ago. There was fear and terror frozen into their gaping faces—thousands of them. Wave on wave—wave on wave—they surged and cried out to him.

And they shrank back from him as if from a lightning blast. He was glowing, burning—every fiber of him—with an incandescent blaze that would have seared blind any normal eyes.

But he was not normal. He was a god in an inferno of light, a great bubble of it that swept him on and on through the reaches of space and eternity, beyond realms where Kronweld was only a half remembered dream that had never existed in reality—into a land where mutely pleading faces looked up at

him and cried out for salvation. Wave on wave—wave on wave—

The light in and about him faded and died. The vast concourse of humanity vanished.

He was alone, utterly alone in all the universe. There was not another creature in existence. Dreamless and at peace he floated in the vast void that stretched between creations his mind could not grasp.

He began to laugh. This was a stupid, an impossible existence. He, therefore, had ceased to exist. But he had had existence a moment before— The moment before—he couldn't remember it. There was no moment before. He was in eternity and there is no before eternity.

His laughter shook the light-spangled vault that encompassed him. It undulated the space in which he floated and he began to rise and fall—rise and fall—in increasing waves that swelled to prodigious amplitude. Waves that flung him from one end of the universe to the other and returned him, smashing and shattering great incomprehensible suns and destroying worlds in vast sweeps.

And then he burst the expanding wave and plummeted through other times and other universes, borne on the mad explosion of a creation.

His vision congealed. His feet were pumping slowly up and down, slogging through deep, wind-blown sand. From horizon to horizon there was only sand, white-hot sand that reflected the light of a single globe in searing radiance.

In the midst of the desert there rose a great towering pinnacle of rock. A shaft of salvation. He must get to that rock. His life depended on it. The life of Kronweld—he paused a moment and struggled to recall what the word meant—Kronweld depended on it. He must reach that pinnacle in the blinding sands.

15

AWAKENING CAME LIKE A BIRTH, LIKE THAT OTHER BIRTH Ketan had known eons ago when he first came into the sunlight out of the golden doors of the Temple. As then, the sun was now blinding his eyes and the physical reality of the world attacked him with a thousand spears.

He shut his eyes against the impact of the blue sky and the globe that rode high upon it. But the whispering of the wind was thunder in his ears. The breath of it was like ice laid across his face, and the rough ground on which he lay tortured the sensitiveness of his flesh.

He opened his eyes cautiously. Whatever nameless existence this might be it was surely not life, nor was this realm Kronweld. He was quite sure that it was not life, yet was there perception in death?

He lay back again and closed his eyes. When he opened them once more, the light in the sky was less and the wind was colder. There was another sound that had impinged upon his senses during the endless era he had lain there, but only now did he understand it. Once before, in Dark Land, he had heard such a sound, the rushing of a mighty stream of water, such as was never known in Kronweld.

Slowly he raised upon his arms and felt the dullness slipping from his mind like a drawn curtain. He was aware of himself, of his own identity once more. Gradually it came back, that last fantastic dream of thundering down eons and across infinity. But it was no dream. His mind jerked back to the reality of the chamber of birth.

Elta.

He remembered she was coming with him to—wherever he was. But she had not been at the watcher's seat as she had promised. She had been caught, perhaps slain, for her attack on Anetel.

Uselessness and futility took hold of him as it had done before when Elta had gone to Preparation Center and he had thought her lost. Only this time there was no way back for him. No way back to Kronweld. No way back to Elta.

The ecstasy of attainment of his goal of passing through the great Edge was lost and dimmed by his overwhelming loneliness.

He turned slowly and sat upright. He was in the midst of a forest. There was no sign of house or structure or life. There was no sign of the vast concourse of pleading faces he had seen through the gateway in the Edge. There was no sign of the great Edge itself, nor yet of the desert and the pinnacle.

Never had he seen such a forest as this. Trees there were in Dark Land, but in the dark and cold, and under the smoke-hidden skies they were small and feeble things. The towering columns above and about him now were terrifying as he looked up between them and watched their tips sway against the sky. A sense of vertigo spun his vision.

He wondered where he was. It was an utterly meaningless question. He was in a special, self-centered, self-created world where he alone would live and die. He wanted to lie back down, but his tortured senses protested further contemplation. He rose and began walking to drive the wonder and terror out of his mind. Driving his feet onward, stepping over stones and branches and guiding his way through the trees reduced his tortured self-questioning.

He found himself descending a slope and the sound of flowing water became louder. In a moment he could see the stream. He stared in fascination. It was a thing of clear beauty. No man of Kronweld had ever before seen such a thing. Water there came only from stagnant, hot pools and had to be artificially cooled. When he advanced and touched his hand in this stream, it was icy.

He drank deeply and resumed his slow picking of a pathway along the bank. He was increasingly conscious of hunger. He wondered if there were Bors or other beasts here as in Dark Land that might be eaten, but he had no weapons.

After a time, the forest began to recede and widen, more sandy beaches lined each side of the stream before they sloped sharply to rock crags above him.

The sky grew darker as he went down the widening shore. There was no purpose in his mind, only to keep driving his feet and keep his mind from asking questions.

There came a sound that must have been repeated a dozen times before his reluctant senses answered. He stopped and listened. It was a whimpering, crying sound that became a sudden shrill scream. He thought of the Place of Dying in Kronweld where the injured and sick who refused self-death were taken. He had been told that such sounds were heard in the Place.

He hurried his steps. And then he heard a faint rustling in the sand behind him. He turned just in time to see a dirty, ragged creature leap with madness in his eyes. Then a thick arm closed about Ketan's throat and crushed until blackness spattered his vision.

Ketan did not know when the life-crushing force was released. He was only aware of returning light to his vision and the dim, faraway sound of the stream.

And there was another sound, a heavy, incredulous muttering flowed to his ears.

He struggled to a sitting position. The man who had attacked was sitting up on the ground before Ketan. He stared

in amazement. Then Ketan realized the man was deceived by his woman's disguise.

The man was thick and dark with hairy arms and chest exposed by ragged garments. His face was black with matted beard, but his haggard eyes were young and sharpness still gleamed from them. They stared at Ketan as if to pierce him from beneath their deep cavities that undercut a long, high forehead.

Behind him, Ketan closed his hand on a sharp rock that lay beside the stream. The man opened his mouth in unintelligible mutterings again, and Ketan moved.

His arm whipped around and hurled the rock straight to the man's forehead. There was an instant of surprised pain on the bearded face. Then the man tumbled backwards without a sound. Blood slowly seeped out of the wound and made pools of his eyes and drained into his black beard.

Ketan was sick. The sight of human blood flowing was more than the ordinary Seeker of Kronweld could endure. It was something to bring terror and nausea to the strongest of men.

He rose with a jerky, unnerved motion and hurried away without a backward glance. He was trembling in every muscle.

Then there came that scream of pain and terror once more.

He looked about wildly for its source, but nothing was visible. After a moment he became aware of the smoky haze drifting upon the air and noticed for the first time a low, smoking fire on the beach ahead near the hillside. A narrow-mouthed cavern was in the hill directly behind it.

Instinctively, he knew the cry had come from that cave.

If this were a Place of Dying, he wished to avoid it as widely as possible. Imbued all his life with a horror of defective human mechanism, and taught that the only remedy for damage to a body was death, Ketan shrank from the source of those cries that shrilled out upon the air.

Yet there were a group of Seekers in Kronweld, and Ketan had long sympathized with them, who believed that it was inhuman and unnecessary for a human being to die or be killed for some small injury. They believed that human repair was possible.

He shrank back from the approach to the cave, but an inherent compassion drew him on. The sound was like that of a woman in pain. He trudged through the light sand towards the cave mouth.

In the dimness within the cavern he could distinguish nothing. But there was someone there. A voice cried out as

he stood in the opening. He entered and stood still, waiting for his eyes to accustom themselves to the dim emission of a light that came from a far corner. He saw that it was a smoking wick suspended in a dish of grease.

When he could see at last he surveyed the cavern. Before him, on a low piled bed of springy tree branches was a woman thrashing about in pain. She was trying to reach a bottle standing in a niche in the far wall of the cavern. Ketan reached for it and gave it to her.

She looked at him gratefully from glazed eyes, not comprehending his strangeness. She kept crying out a single word as if calling a name.

There was a piece of dirty rag in her hand which she was moistening with the contents of a bottle. Ketan recognized the pungent odor. She put the rag to her nostrils, breathing deeply.

He saw then. She was taking the self-death. He had no right to be there. He rose to leave, but a Seeking curiosity made him wonder why she was there, who she was. Where was the city and the home from which she had come?

She had subsided now and the cloth fell from her face. He bent down to replace it so that she might die quickly. As he did so, he saw that her half-uncovered body was horribly swollen and distended. He shrank back from the ghastly disfigurement. Never in Kronweld had such a condition been known.

Dimly, a recollection and faint, unbelievable comprehension came. Once—once before he had seen such a condition. The pores of his skin opened and cold sweat oozed through the plastic that covered him.

He had seen it once before.

The Bors.

He snatched the soaked rag from her face and peered closely. She must not die.

Her breath was coming hard and slowly. Ketan felt helpless and bewildered. The goal of all his Seeking seemed within reach and there was nothing he knew to do.

He looked up suddenly as the opening of the cavern was darkened by a wavering shadow that reeled across it. It was made by the man he had left for dead.

Perhaps he did not see Ketan at first in the dimness of the cave for his eyes were not upon him. He staggered across the floor and dropped beside the bed of piled branches.

"Maryl" he cried the single word.

Then he saw Ketan across the bed. He uttered a wild bellow

of rage and started to rise, but his glance fell upon the bottle beside Ketan and the cloth in his hand, and went back to the woman.

Slowly, his face softened. A smile of gratitude broke upon its bleakness. He reached out a hand. Hesitatingly, Ketan looked down at it, then extended his own in half understood response.

The questioning contemplation rose in Ketan's mind again. Who were these two? And what land was this? Perhaps it was beyond Dark Land. No man had ever penetrated beyond those far borders. There was only an impenetrable morass of steaming, boiling swamps where nightmare creations of life swam and flew.

For a moment he considered the possibility that he had simply passed through the Edge and had fallen into the barren land spoken of by Anetel. But there was no Edge here, nor did this resemble the land described by her fantastic explanation of the Temple of Birth.

He dismissed the problem. It was trivial beside the momentous occurrence before him. The climax of his Seeking had come. The proof of his heretical theory of life was at hand.

The man across the bed stood up suddenly and motioned Ketan outside. He followed. In the dimming light of day the two stood appraising each other in mutual wonderment. All the while, the ragged, bearded man looked nervously about as if afraid of some unseen pursuer. His tense anxiety transmitted itself to Ketan.

He spoke a brief sentence that sounded like a command, utterly unintelligible to Ketan. Yet something about it struck a weird chord of familiarity. The intonation and the uniting of many basic sounds were the same as in his own language. Still, the words had no meaning to him.

In disgust, the weary, haggard dweller of the cave saw that he didn't understand. He gave up and threw an armful of wood on the fire that was burning before the mouth of the cave. Then he brought out a bundle of stained scraps of cloth and surveyed them in dismay and resignation. He took a short pole from the woodpile and thrust the end into the fire until it began to burn, then drew it quickly out and stuck it upright in the sand.

With a pair of smaller sticks he lifted a rag and held it arm's length away from him over the fire. He let it remain until it began to scorch. Then he draped it on the charred end of the upright pole.

He motioned Ketan to do that with the remainder of the

rags. Ketan obeyed, wondering what was the purpose of the mysterious charring of the rags. Perhaps some useless superstition to placate the God. Such was not unknown in Kronweld.

The other man dragged forward a large pot which he erected on supports. With smaller containers, he brought water from the stream, and then built a huge fire beneath the pot and watched impatiently as it slowly heated and boiled.

As a final preparation he brought out a sharp-edged knife and held it in the flames, then quickly wrapped it in one of the scorched rags. Lastly, he tied a cloth about his face and washed his hands violently in water and sand and immersed them for a long time in painfully hot water and held them over the flames. Drying, he wrapped his hands in squares of the cloth. All this he indicated to Ketan to imitate.

Low moanings and steadily increasing cries that chilled Ketan had been coming from the cavern. The two hurried in.

The woman was moving about in wild agony. The man uttered a low, cursing sound from his throat and drew her back to the center of the bed. He moistened the cloth further with the liquid in the bottle and applied a touch of it to her nostrils. He motioned Ketan to hold her arms and keep her pinned down. Ketan obeyed, hardly able to look upon her monstrous, distorted form.

In a sickening wave of nausea that rendered him half conscious, he obeyed the motioned instructions of the bearded man. But they were few. He was working in a tight frenzy of fear. It transmitted itself to Ketan. He knew that something was wrong, but not what it was. He realized only a great fear and terror that filled the small confines of the cave and seemed to be drawing his life out slowly with each breath.

An eternity of time passed. The woman shuddered beneath Ketan's hands, but it was becoming fainter. Then the man rose to his feet, holding a tiny, red animal form. He spanked it smartly and held its mouth to his and breathed long and slowly.

A haze seemed to swirl about Ketan and surged over him. His life-long conditioning to revulsion at biological manifestations had not been even partially overcome by his own unregistered investigations of his experience with the Bors.

This was birth. This was the beginning of life. Somewhere at his own beginning, there had been just such a scene. Somewhere there might yet be the woman who had contained him. What horror it would be to meet her and know—

He understood the reaction of the members of the First Group when he had spoken of this thing.

Yet there was another, unknown feeling that tempered his revulsion. In a world where all men knew how they were created, there could not be universal ignorance of those by whom they were given life. He wondered fleetingly what kind of a world that would be, what kind of relationships would exist between people in such a world.

He let his glance fall upon the bearded man who held the tiny human. There were only worry, fear, and something Ketan could not name registered on the man's face.

Ketan thought of Elta and shuddered.

He felt a sudden change in the woman whose arms he held still tightly upon the bough bed. She jerked convulsively. Then she was still. He looked at her quiet, distorted face and felt for her breathing and the beating of her heart.

Slowly, in fascinated horror, he drew away. It was as if her flesh had turned to some alien substance. For the second time he had watched a human being die. After a timeless age a single thought swept through his brain. It was of Elta. Did a life always mean a death?

His glance went to the bearded man who was standing like a stone image, the red little form hanging loosely in his arms. They remained thus for an indeterminate time. There was no sound but the faint, faraway bubbling of the steam and the occasional crackling of the smoking grease that gave them light.

The stillness was broken by the sharp cry of anguish that came from the tattered, bearded man. He dropped the still body from his arms and sank beside the two lifeless figures, burying his head upon the woman's breast.

Ketan walked slowly from the cavern to the glistening stream. The globe was at the base of the sky and shadows leaped out in long, dark fingers from the tops of the trees.

A freezing chill was in the air, something almost unknown to Ketan. But there was more that made his body tremble. He had seen death again.

And the newly created life—what had become of it? There had never been life there. Something was horribly wrong. Surely such things were not meant to be. The creation of life could not mean such terror and death as the woman had suffered—and such sorrow as he had felt welling out of the man.

There was a step behind him. He turned upon the man. The dark burning eyes stared out at him half seeing, but the

thick, shaggy arm that beckoned was not to be withstood. Ketan followed him back to the cave.

Inside, he indicated that Ketan was to wrap the dead bodies with the few rags and coverings that were available. Somehow, Ketan felt glad to be able to help him, though he had no idea what purpose lay behind this.

When he was finished, he went out and found the man scooping a deep hole in the sands. Wondering at its purpose, Ketan bent to help. The glowing coals of the fire gave the only light by the time they were through. Treading heavily, the man entered the cave and returned slowly, bearing the tightly wrapped forms of the woman and the infant.

He lowered them tenderly into the hole in the sand. With a soft, windlike sound the sand was brushed back over the bodies and formed a low mound. And all was stillness once more.

The second globe was rising, now, Ketan saw. It was coming up over the low hills from whence the stream was flowing. But something was wrong with it. It was a pale, insignificant thing that spread only a cold silvery light over the landscape. For the first time Ketan felt a surge of fear. This unnatural globe spoke of a universe where Kronweld's existence was a mere fantasy.

He turned to the man. The latter was standing still, face contorted with utter bitterness, bathed in the silver glow. With a shudder, his body gathered into itself in a contraction that seemed to swell and shrink him at once. Every muscle was drawn to the limit of its power. He stood out, a fearful silhouette of black and silver.

And one mighty fist was raised in the night, testifying to the sudden burst of rage and berserk fury that poured from his throat. Then that fist came down and pressed brutally against his face as his shoulders hunched over that mound in the sand.

He raised and sprang away. Before Ketan's eyes could distinguish the point of the shadowy forest towards which he headed, he was gone.

Fear closed down upon Ketan. The mad, meaningless drama he had witnessed that afternoon haunted reason from his mind. The utterly foreign surroundings bespoke only nightmare creations, and his body ached from its exertions and lack of food.

Wearily, he spread the robe on the hard sand and lay upon it, not daring the ghosts that stood watch in the cavern. The fire died and he slept.

16

IN THE NIGHTTIME IT CAME AGAIN—THE DREAM AND THE vision. But it was like a waking vision and not a dream of night and a tired mind. It seemed to open before him and around him slowly, as if in creation while he watched. The ocean of sand undulated and swirled and became solid. Without being aware of rising, he was upon his feet and they were pumping endlessly through the dragging sands.

He was closer to the pinnacle of rock than he had ever been before. It rose a hundred times his height above the desert floor. Sheer walls shot up on every side, but he knew how to reach the top.

He drew nearer. The whining sands rose to sting his face like sparkling needles surging upon him in air-borne waves. A low moan spoke from all the desert as if it were one mighty voice. The cloud of sand increased and beat about his head. It obscured his vision. Blinded, he slogged on. Then there came again the voice—

"You must not fail, Lonely One. All my world lies in your hands. Come—"

He awoke trembling with cold. The sculptored plastic served well to conserve body heat, but it and the induction robes did not entirely suffice for clothing.

He looked about for material to build a fire, though he did not know how he was going to make one without a radioactive starter.

Then the smell of smoke and the crackling of burning wood came to him. He turned. Down at the edge of the stream a fire was roaring, and before it a man sat on his haunches gnawing fiercely at a huge chunk of meat. It was the bearded man of the night before.

Ketan moved down the beach, uncertain of how he would be met, but his steps quickened as he felt the radiant heat of the fire.

He paused and looked at the man. Indifferently, and with no expression upon his face, he offered Ketan a slab of meat

that had been roasting over the flames. Gladly, Ketan accepted it and squatted upon the warm sand.

Partially satisfied, Ketan looked at the remains of the carcass from which they were eating. It was a fairly large animal with a smooth, brown hide and with forked horns bearing many points upon its head. It was not as large or as heavily built as the Bors.

When Ketan turned back to him the bearded man had finished eating, and his head was buried between his knees. He looked up as Ketan stirred. A half dozen strangely familiar words came slowly from his lips.

Ketan thought he was being asked who he was. He told the bearded one, who seemed to listen attentively. He seemed to evince a half comprehension even as did Ketan and their verbal exchange was begun. Ketan decided there was yet an advantage in his disguise and kept his voice at falsetto pitch.

The man indicated his name as William Douglas. To Ketan, it sounded as if it were two names, but he accepted both since the man indicated no preference for one or the other.

The wound that Ketan had inflicted the day before was caked with dry blood and swollen. After the meal, William Douglas washed the wound at the stream and then went into the woods. He returned with a few leaves that he chewed and matted together and bound to his head with a strip torn from his clothing.

He poured water and sand over the fire. Expertly, he cut the two hind quarters from the carcass and hoisted them on his shoulders. Ketan suggested he carry some. William Douglas looked at the female disguise questioningly, then gave him a forequarter.

They started down the beachway. William Douglas did not look back towards the spot where the woman and the little human were buried in the sand.

There was no question in Ketan's mind about following the man. There was nothing else to do. He wanted to learn to speak with him, to find out where he came from, and where this strange, wild land was.

Most of all, he wanted to assuage the loneliness that was like hunger within him. Companionship in this alien land was worth life itself. His mind had shaken off its shocked lethargy of the day before somewhat, and he recognized that this was certainly not death, as he had fantastically presumed. Nor did the bridge of time and space he had crossed lead to any land in the world of Kronweld. He had come through the Edge, he was certain.

But where was the Edge? Why was it not visible here?

And ever, his thoughts went back to Elta. He must somehow find a way back, hoping until all reason for hope was gone that she might yet be safe.

Hampered by the burden of the meat and the inability to use sign language helps, their attempts at conversation went lamely for a time, but Ketan began swiftly gaining a vocabulary in the language of William Douglas. It became obvious that Ketan would do the learning, rather than vice versa.

William Douglas told him they were heading for a village of about two hundred inhabitants and that they should reach there by nightfall.

Ketan inquired about the globes in the sky. He tried to indicate that there should be two of nearly equal brightness, but it was impossible to make the man understand that.

He pointed upward with the stub of the hindquarter he carried. "Sun," he said. "Last night you saw the moon."

Ketan's mind began to accept that those were the only two globes visible. But it floundered when he tried to conceive them as *different* globes from those he knew. He gave it up to the ever growing list of inexplicables.

There was a more burning quest that his mind would not relinquish and now he tried to describe it. Half in words of William Douglas' language, and half in his own, he said, "I want to find a desert place where there is only sand and a great rock that reaches *up*."

Bending down, he drew a wide circle in the sand and placed a sliver of rock in its center, then he stood up to indicate the horizon and the great height of the rock above him.

William Douglas looked puzzled. He pointed into the far distance through the trees. "Desert," he said. "Sand." But he indicated the rock and shook his head.

They moved on and the day grew late. It was almost dark in the depths amid the trees. Earlier, William Douglas had kept a cautious glance roving constantly about, but now he marched straight on without glancing aside, as if whatever danger he had once feared were now removed.

Ketan despaired of finding the pinnacle. If only there were some indications where it was, something more than the endless, blowing sand. Perhaps it had no counterpart in reality at all. Perhaps it was only the result of some early intense stimulus that repeated the dream when his mind was tense and strained.

But he didn't believe that. He believed, with no rational excuse for doing so, that the pinnacle was real, that somewhere

it existed and that he must find it or go mad. The first time the vision had come, he recalled, was the first night he spent out of the Temple after his birth into Kronweld. It had terrified him, for he had not been asleep. He was sure of that. He had been awake in a room with others, listening to one of the Teachers. Suddenly all his surroundings had blanked out and he found himself trudging through that desert seeking that faraway pinnacle, which was then on the horizon.

Each time, each of the eighteen times, it had seemed closer, as if he were slowly progressing in that other existence towards his goal. Sometimes he wondered if that were the real world and all of Kronweld was only his dream.

Night came swiftly in the forest, but William Douglas did not slow his pace. They had stopped at midday for a rest and another meal of the meat, but now they kept going. They were near the village, William Douglas said.

Ketan wondered what would happen when he got there. What would he do? Would his life become an endless quest for the pinnacle and the way back to Elta?

So intent was he upon his own thoughts that he didn't notice that William Douglas had stopped until he bumped into him. The man had topped a low rise and now stood immobile, staring down. Ketan came up and followed his silent gaze with his own eyes.

Below them, in a tiny valley, smoke rose in a slow, grayish mass from a hundred dimly glowing fires. It must have burned all day, Ketan thought, and now was dying out.

From William Douglas' throat there came a low animal sound that Ketan knew was not words, but it conveyed unmistakably its world of despair and anguish.

There was not a dwelling left standing as they descended the hill and walked among the smoking ruins. They came to the center and William Douglas dropped the precious hindquarters of meat to the ground. His shoulders ached and burned from carrying the burden throughout the day. Now there was no need to carry it farther. Ketan understood he meant it as a present for the villagers.

"What happened?" Ketan asked.

"Statists—hunter Statists—"

The word was like a flame that touched off a holocaust of recollections. Once—once, on that night at the *Karildex* when Matra had come to him and demanded use of the master keyboard, she had said—what was it?—"For more than a hundred *tara* an organization has existed in our midst—the

final objective—is the destruction of Kronweld. They fear us and will destroy us. They are the Statists."

Ketan remembered her words. He could see her face as she had stood trembling with a fear that seemed to shake her withered form like a dry branch in a cold, Dark Land wind.

But she had not told him who the Statists were, only that strange fantasy of a world surrounding Kronweld. She had said that Elta knew what to do, and he had not been able to find what Elta knew.

"Who are the Statists?" Ketan turned to William Douglas. His voice was tense in restrained excitement.

"The Statists?" William Douglas let his hand drift out in a gesture over the ruins. "They are those who do this. Tyrants, madmen, despoilers—how many words are there in your language to describe such? They are all of that and more. They have ruined a world."

Ketan didn't comprehend. There were no words in his language to describe those who would create such a ruin.

"Men?" he asked.

William Douglas' face grimaced. "They have the general form of men."

Ketan understood neither the tone nor the words. Before he could speak. William Douglas bent down and picked up one of the fallen hindquarters. "We'll have to go on," he said, dully. "There is another village we can reach by midnight—if it still exists."

The Statists—whatever the word meant, it was a connection between this world and Kronweld. It didn't matter that it was a word spoken in hatred and bitterness. It was a connection, and hope surged within Ketan. He would find what it meant.

William Douglas seemed able to pick his way unerringly in the dark. Ketan stumbled and groped almost blindly behind him. Once he stumbled and fell over an object that lay across the path. As he rose, he turned to see what it was, but William Douglas urged him on.

"Dead," he said.

Then Ketan knew what that and the other shapeless objects strewn through the trees were. The villagers, the two hundred who had lived here, were dead with their village.

Ketan did not know how long it was that he stumbled and groped before William Douglas put out a cautioning hand and brought him to a standstill. For a moment he couldn't see why they had stopped. He followed the direction of Wil-

liam Douglas' finger with his gaze, and glimpsed dimly in the light of the feeble globe a movement on the trail ahead of them.

There was a continuous, undulating line of motion there. His vision resolved it into individuals, and he saw more than a dozen figures.

William Douglas advanced cautionsly until they were only a score of steps behind the figures. Then he said, "It's all right. They are from the Village Brent."

The figures turned with a frightened start as William Douglas hailed them. Then, recognizing him, they burst upon him and their voices were mournful in the night. In a vocal exchange so rapid that Ketan could catch only a fraction of it, they told the story of the destruction of Village Brent.

There were eight men and six women. Two of the latter carried little ones. Some of them were injured. A man's arm dangled like a horrible pendulum when he moved. One of the women had hair so blood-covered that it was molded upon her head and about her face. Surely they would be taken to the Place of Dying, Ketan thought. And then it occurred to him. These people had no Place of Dying. They fell and were buried where they lay, even as back at the cave.

But what, then, would happen to these mangled ones?

Assuming leadership, William Douglas took control and they continued their way. Left to himself, Ketan tried to imagine the Statists, who or what they were.

He failed to conceive men who would wreak such destruction and death as he had seen. In all the history of Kronweld no such event had been witnessed—but this was not the world of Kronweld.

Their common point was the enemy. The Statists. Was it possible that the Statists planned such destruction for Kronweld?

By midnight they came to the next village. As they approached, Ketan felt a rising apprehension in the refugees. They came at last to a turn in the trail that revealed the village site. An audible gasp and thankful cries came from the band. The village was intact and undamaged.

Few impressions bore any logic to Ketan as they came into the narrow streets and roused the villagers. He saw that William Douglas was recognized as an authority by all. Why or what position he held, Ketan did not find out. He was shuffled among the refugees and found himself led into a dingy shelter, lighted by an oil-burning lamp. There was a dirty

bed of hewn slabs against the far wall. The coverings were animal skins covered with a grayish white fluff.

An overfat, middle-aged woman directed him into the room. He got just a glimpse of her bedraggled hair and tattered dress of skins. The latter looked like the hide of the animal they had eaten that day. At least there were no inhibitions among these people regarding the use of animals, Ketan reflected.

Later, she brought in a bowl of bitter liquid and a slab of hard cooked meat. He ate a fraction of it. Too weary for any further investigation or questioning of his surroundings, he slept.

As soon as he was awake the next morning, William Douglas came to see him. There was still a deference in the man's manner because of Ketan's disguise and Ketan wondered how best to get rid of it. Its deterioration was giving him a rather horrible appearance.

But he had no time to consider that, now. With William Douglas was another man, lean and almost black with pigment Ketan recognized as due to the rays of the globe. He wondered that they did not use day cloaks of some kind.

"This is John Edwards," William Douglas said.

"John Edwards," Ketan repeated.

The man parted his lips in a welcoming grin of white teeth.

"Tell him where you want to go," said William Douglas. "The sand and the rock."

Ketan's whole being quivered. Was this a man who could lead him to the pinnacle? Eagerly, he described the scene as he had to William Douglas.

The man looked puzzled and spoke to William Douglas in words that Ketan could not understand. The newcomer looked thoughtful, then he pointed out the door and far beyond the forest and mentioned a name. William Douglas nodded.

He turned to Ketan. "John Edwards knows the country better than anyone. He thinks he can lead you to the place you describe. Will you go with him?"

"Yes! Now?"

William Douglas shook his head. "Not yet; we must rest. It is a long journey and there is much you must tell me. We must learn to speak better. In a day or two we will go."

"You will come with me?"

"Yes."

Why he was so anxious for William Douglas to accompany him, Ketan could not have said, except that that first terrible moment of awakening in the forest had been dispelled by the

man and in his mind, Ketan still clung to him like an anchor of sanity.

They sat down and motioned Ketan to do likewise.

"We want to talk to you," William Douglas said. He formed his words slowly, groping for expression that he knew would be intelligible. "Your coming is of great importance to us. We have not told the villagers that you are not one of us. We want to know if you have come to help us or if you have escaped too, from some land that is unknown to us. Do you know where you are?"

Ketan shook his head. "There should be two great globes, where there is only one. There should be the Great Edge, visible from any part of the land."

"The Great Edge? What is that?" asked John Edwards.

"Wait," said William Douglas. "You are in a forest called Kyab. We call the planet Earth. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No."

"Tell us about your world."

He would rather have heard about theirs, Ketan thought. But there was some urgency about their manner that invited his co-operation, that they might understand each other as quickly as possible. He sensed a fleeting impression that they somehow half expected him, that they could explain all the mystery of his exodus from Kronweld.

"Kronweld is flat, shaped like a half circle." Ketal drew a diagram in the dirt floor. "On one side is the Great Edge. No man knows what that is, except that it is a curtain of blackness that reaches beyond our limits to understand. Encompassing Kronweld on the circular portion is Fire Land. It is a land of molten pools that explode into the air, of burning ground and hot gases that rise from it. Only a few, including myself have ever gone through it into the region beyond, which we call Dark Land because the globes are never visible there due to the smoke and ash that blows from Fire Land. There is animal and plant life there unknown in Kronweld."

"How many of there are you?"

Ketan didn't comprehend at first. When he did, he stopped. How could he tell them? They had no units in common.

William Douglas saw his hesitation. He drew a square on the ground with ten divisions on a side. "Ten," he said, indicating the side. He pointed then to the square. "One hundred."

Ketan drew a square and indicated a side. "One hundred," he said.

"Ten thousand of them," said William Douglas slowly. "Surely there must be more." He looked at Ketan questioningly. "Do any ever come into Kronweld through the Great Edge?"

"That's the way all are born into Kronweld! Tell me: What do you know of it?" Ketan demanded. This world must not be as alien as he believed. These men knew of the Great Edge and the mystery that was beyond the Temple of Birth.

But William Douglas was shaking his head. "We know nothing of it for certain. It is only something that many of us have guessed at for a long time without any basis for our beliefs.

"In our world there is a law that requires all the new born to be examined for criminal or destructive traits. When these are found in a baby it is destroyed. That is all. There are some of us who do not believe that those—at least not all of them—who are supposed to be destroyed are actually killed. We have believed that they are sent—*somewhere*."

"Where?"

William Douglas shook his head. "Beyond . . . beyond the Great Edge perhaps. To Kronweld?"

"But we of Kronweld are not criminals, destroyers! Those are the Statists, so you said," protested Ketan.

"It's long and involved," said William Douglas. "We ourselves do not know even where to look for clues. All we know is that life is something hardly better than death among us. Let me tell you:

"I didn't say what we are called, did I? We are called the Illegitimates. It means that we are those who have no right to live. We are those who have not been examined by the Selector. Our parents and theirs before them, refused to risk submitting their children and chance seeing their lives snuffed out without mercy.

"The law requires that all new born be brought within one month to the Selector. I have seen only the great central Selector in Danfer. Others controlled by it are scattered throughout the land. It is the most terrible sight in the world. Hundreds of parents come each day to the building and place their babies in the care of the machine. It is a great, monstrous creation that fills one end of a huge hall. The babies are carried automatically through the depths of it where every feature and psychological attribute of their minds is analyzed and charted.

"Most of them return from the machine to the arms of their

waiting parents. Some of them never emerge from the machine."

Those were the faces he had seen, Ketan thought. There was the vast and crying multitude that had called out to him. He had seen the great hall of the Selector.

"I saw the parents of such a baby one day," said William Douglas. "They took their baby into the hall with hundreds of others. I saw them go into the receiving room and wait. They were there all day, and they sat watching others who had come in after them receive their babies and go away. Neither the man nor the woman said a word. At night they got up and went out—without their baby. They hadn't made a sound or spoken a word. But I looked into their eyes as they passed me. The sight of those eyes will be with me until the end of my life."

There was a silence which Ketan broke at last. He had to know about that scene back in the cave. He spoke softly to William Douglas.

"Your child—"

After a long moment William Douglas looked up. "Mary and I were Illegitimates. Our parents had been. We went back on a special mission to try to find out something about the Statists. We bore false brands, to simulate those marked on every individual examined by the Selectors. I was a surgeon there and was appointed once to see the Director himself, the head of the Statists, but the appointment was suddenly canceled, and I found out they were suspicious of us. They would have killed us both if they had seized us, but Mary was to have a child soon. We had to go. We made it to the Village Dornam and the night we arrived it was destroyed by a casual Statist hunter who discovered it. Mary and I had to flee."

Though Ketan had never known a relationship between himself and another individual such as existed between all these here, he could sense the feeling that was within William Douglas. Because of Elta he could understand the man's emotion towards his Mary. And dimly, through the thick layer of conditioning, he could sense the reaction towards that new life that should have existed and never had.

It was a world of terrible, incomprehensible conflicts, this land into which he had come. It was like men fighting in the night, none knowing who or what his opponent was.

And yet Kronweld itself had been just such as this. For untold *tara* perhaps, conflict had raged beneath the surface

of Kronweld and he had known nothing until those brief days when he had plunged into the maelstrom.

Somehow, he felt sure that the conflicts in the two worlds were related, yet he did not see how. Missing strands of information which neither he nor the Illegitimates seemed to possess must span the gap.

"Why have you believed that those who disappear are not dead?" Ketan asked. "Apart from what I have told you, I mean."

"They have always made us believe that the Selector culled out the criminals, the destroyers, the tyrants. But we have criminals with us. And the Statists themselves surpass any tyranny that existed in past ages, yet they came into existence after the Selector was in use.

"But more than that. There have been times—few, to be sure, but enough that their evidence cannot be ignored—when those in the Selector hall have seen, as if through a gateway, other men dressed in strange garb. You see, those rejected by the Selector are brought out to a sort of altar which is visible to all except the parents whose children are within the machine. These are prevented from seeing the rejection of their own, because it is such a terrible sight that they would create a disturbance.

"The rejects on the altarlike support are surrounded by electrodes that inclose them completely in a ball of flame and when the flame dies there is no trace of the infant.

"It is on this altar, between these electrodes, when the fire is dying, that men have been seen. And other times, when no infant is on the altar there comes a faint glow sometimes and half ghostly figures are seen between the electrodes. It is these things that have made us believe that—well, *something* besides death occurs there."

"I have seen such a light," said Ketan. "I saw it in the chamber of birth in the Temple in Kronweld. It lies next to the great Edge and when the gateway opens, there is a great flame that seems to burn a hole in the Edge itself. When it dies, another infant has been born in Kronweld.

"It must be the same thing. It is too similar to be merely a coincidental phenomenon."

"Perhaps. Many of us have hoped for years for some such explanation. The reason I first spoke of the Statists to you is that those men have been seen in the hall of the Selector. I thought perhaps you knew of us, were fighting the Statists, too. But how is it that you knew the word, yet nothing about them?"

Ketan explained as briefly as possible what he knew of the inexplicable events preceding his plunge through the great Edge. The two Illegitimates listened with mixed emotions of wonder and surprise, but as he finished, William Douglas nodded as though his own convictions were confirmed.

"The Statists are there. Why, or what they intend to do, I don't know, but it seems pretty obvious that Kronweld possesses a science that the Statists do not have. How could that be? Why should the Statists want the destruction of Kronweld if, as seems possible, they have deliberately built it up. Can you think of any explanations, Ketan?"

"No. My only concern is to get back. I've got to go back and see what has happened to Elta."

"If she is a Statist, perhaps she is already here, among her own people."

"She couldn't be! I've known her—"

"How long?"

"All my life."

"Is she older than you? Did she come through the Edge first?"

"A couple of *tara*. Perhaps three of your years."

"When did you actually meet her? Was it long enough after your 'birth' so that she might not have come through in the same manner as you?"

"She is not one of the Statists!" said Ketan.

The Illegitimates made no answer. Ketan needed none. He was thinking of Matra and her accusations at the *Karildex*. But even she had become reconciled to Elta and trusted her in the thing that she wanted to do. But what was Elta's purpose? Who was Matra?

Ketan's mind swirled with the unanswered questions and their thousand implications. He was roused by the voice of William Douglas. He was aware the man must have been speaking for some time.

"The thing we would like to know is what this mysterious pinnacle means. How did you know there was such a thing here? Why do you desire so strongly to find it?"

Ketan wondered how he could explain something to them that he could not explain to himself. Carefully, picking each word from the meager vocabulary he shared with them, he told him of his dreams and visions, and the voice that he had heard. "It's as if I were being drawn by some force located in the pinnacle," he said. "I can imagine how that must sound to you, but it's true. There's something there, something for me alone. There is a power there, a power created by man

that is reaching out for me. How it knows who or what or where I am, I don't know, but it's drawing me on. I almost believe that if I should close my eyes and begin walking I would be drawn to it, so strongly has that sense of attraction been with me."

Both the Illegitimates were silent. William Douglas was looking into the distance where John Edwards said he thought the pinnacle might be.

At last he turned. "I can't find a place for it in either your story or ours. It seems to have no meaning. I would be prepared not to be dismayed if it turns out to be a figment of imagination. Some early conditioning, perhaps, brings it back, even though you do not remember seeing such a place when you are not under a strain."

"There is such a place," said John Edwards, with certainty. "If it's as you describe, I can take you there. I've never been there, but I've seen it from the Mesas. It's called 'Valley of the Winds' because of its perpetual sandstorms. There is nothing but rock and desert. I don't see what you expect to find there."

"It's *inside*," said Ketan.

"*Inside?*" William Douglas' face set in sudden decision. "We'll go tomorrow. Whatever is there, and however you know of it, it may turn out to be a key to the overthrow of the Statists."

"There is one other thing—" Ketan spoke in sudden confusion.

"What?"

"I am not—exactly what I may seem to you. In order to enter the Temple of Birth it was necessary for me to adopt a disguise. I should like to remove that if possible."

"Of course," said William Douglas. "Some more durable clothing—I'll see that you are supplied."

"And a considerable amount of boiling water."

"Naturally." Apparently he assumed it was for a bath, Ketan thought.

Ketan spent the entire remainder of the day alone in the room. He stripped off the tattered filmy garments he had worn from the Temple and with a knife he had borrowed, he hacked slowly at the half-softened plastic. He called for endless kettles of boiling water with which he tried to melt the resistant plastic. The heat went through to his flesh and he was boiled and mangled by the time he was finished.

It was a poor job, but the rest of the stuff would have to wear off. He donned the rough, skin garments and then realized that they had brought him a woman's dress. He

laughed to himself as he thought of the probable reaction of William Douglas. He sent word for him to come.

It was near dark and the village was preparing to eat, when William Douglas came in.

"Come and get something to eat," said William Douglas. "I've just about finished our preparations for tomorrow. I—" he stopped, staring at Ketan.

Ketan lowered his voice that he had maintained at falsetto pitch until now. "I'd like some man's wear. This doesn't seem quite appropriate."

"Well, I'll be—" William Douglas exclaimed. "So *that* was the disguise."

17

WITH AN UNREASONABLE RELUCTANCE KETAN ALLOWED HIMself to be led out into the midst of the villagers. He was both anxious to discover what the community life of the Illegitimates was like, and at the same time half fearful of contacting them because of a fearfully mounting conviction of his own abnormal conditioning.

Made of clay bricks, the two- to four-room dwellings were grouped irregularly in the clearing of the Valley and separated by crooked, winding pathways that alternately narrowed and widened.

It was difficult for Ketan to comprehend the way of life that these poor conditions represented. That it was not all due to the harried conditions of life created by the frequent attacks of the Statists was obvious.

The people themselves reflected ignorance and lack of Seeking in their faces. Ketan walked among them and looked in vain for the face of a Seeker, one who could plan and build for better conditions than these. But there were none.

The faces were, rather, such faces as Ketan had rarely, if ever, seen in Kronweld. They were faces that spoke something to him that he did not understand, the faces of men and women who defied the Statists and risked their lives every day in their defiance. They were the faces of men and women who would rather live in the crudity and ignorance of these forest villages than submit their children or themselves to the tyranny of the Selector.

Somehow, Ketan liked what he saw there, in spite of the repulsive surroundings. If Kronweld had a few men with faces like theirs, he thought, there would be no forbidden Mysteries there. If some day these people and the people of Kronweld could merge, their attainments would be limitless.

He walked beside William Douglas through the drifting villagers who wandered from house to house, chatting in the streets, nodding in easy deference to William Douglas. The two were walking towards the other end of the village where they were to eat at the place William Douglas had been staying.

They passed a building beside which was a pile of metal wreckage. William Douglas saw his glance.

"Statists'," he said. "They are machines the Statists build to carry themselves through the air. Planes or airships they call them here, but, of course, you have developed such in Kronweld."

Ketan shook his head. "There was no need, so we never produced any such machine. The possibilities of constructing one interested me for a long time, but I never built one. How did you get them?"

"They are poor machines, not like the ones men built a thousand years ago. Sometimes they fail and are forced to land. We capture the Statists and kill them, and bring their machines, which are almost always wrecked, here. It was a hunter in just such a machine that destroyed the two villages, Dorman and Brent."

Another time, and Ketan would have liked to have examined the machines, but the possible principles were obvious and he felt a greater urgency in his other problems now.

They resumed their way. Nearly there, they noticed a knot of villagers gathered at the end of the street. They were gathered about someone in their midst and one was pointing down the street toward the two men.

Suddenly William Douglas uttered a cry. "Carmen!"

He started to run, leaving Ketan behind. Then a woman broke out from the gathered knot and raced towards him. They met halfway in a tight, long-lasting embrace. The woman was crying happily. "Bill! I thought I'd never see you again. I've been to every village—"

When Ketan came up they failed to notice him for a long moment. He stood watching, unable to comprehend the relationship of these two. What kind of people were they, who could watch as William Douglas had watched his companion die only two days before and now—

They turned towards him then, and William Douglas said, "This is Ketan. There's a long story about him that you'll have to hear. And this is my sister, Carmen."

Ketan took the hand she held out towards him. Sister? He wondered. It was a word he had heard. But it implied a relationship between them that he could not comprehend.

William Douglas saw the consternation on his face. He started to smile, then a deeper sense and a touch of pity removed it from his lips.

"My sister," he repeated. "It means that the same man and woman gave us life—we have the same mother and father."

Carmen said nothing, but looked strangely from Ketan to William Douglas.

"We have a brother, too," said William Douglas, "but we don't know where he is. We think the Statists have killed him."

Ketan stood looking from one to the other. He tried to catch something of the bond that was between them and failed. But he knew the surging loneliness that he had always known in Kronweld, the impenetrable wall that seemed to exist there between everyone but companions. And now he thought he saw why it existed.

"Sister," he said slowly. "Brother—Father, Mother—" He repeated the words he had heard like a child learning them for the first time. And the unfamiliar sentiments he faintly glimpsed attached to them were overwhelming. Kronweld, with all the fine beauty and excellence of its Seeking was more barren than the forest villages of the Illegitimates.

There were horses, which Ketan had not seen before, saddled and waiting when he arose the following morning. The sight of William Douglas astride one seemed ludicrous, but he had to admit it was a utilization of animals that had not occurred to him in Kronweld. He doubted, however, that it would be very practicable to ride the Bors.

As he approached the animal he was to ride he doubted also the practicability of his riding a horse. Dubiously, he mounted with the aid of John Edwards.

Besides the three animals they rode, there were three that carried packs of supplies only.

The first globe, or sun, as Ketan was trying to accustom himself to calling it, was not yet above the horizon, but the sky was palely light. There was a sharpness and brilliance in the air that he had never known in Kronweld. It filled him with a strange, sheer exuberance and pleasure in mere existence. Tall, white clouds roamed in the sky.

John Edwards looked up dubiously. "I hope we don't get caught in a good thunderstorm before the day is over."

"We can't wait on that," said William Douglas impatiently. "Finding the pinnacle is of more importance than a thunderstorm."

Behind the casualness of the words Ketan sensed an urgency almost like that which drove himself. He wondered if the forces that reached out from the pinnacle had claimed William Douglas also.

For the first half of the day he had little time to think of anything but learning to ride properly. His two companions rode beside him, constantly keeping watch and trying to show him how to let his body follow the rocking motion of the animal.

Until almost night, they followed a winding trail through the forest, under the great trees that towered like some high vaulted roof above them.

Ketan's instincts for Seeking were overwhelmed by his surroundings. There were Mysteries enough here for all the Seekers in a thousand Kronwelds. Compared with the fifteen different kinds of plants which he had found in Dark Land, he glimpsed a hundred different kinds as he rode along here. Impulse invited him to dismount and examine and collect them, but there was no time for that. Later, perhaps there would come a day.

He saw animals, too. There were tiny, scurrying things that climbed in the trees and raced along the ground. And once or twice he saw large, horned animals like the one William Douglas had killed.

When the sun was nearly down, they began to descend sharply and the trees about them were stubbier and thinned out. Then abruptly they came out on an exposed hillside where the mountains fell away to the endless expanse of desert below.

The sudden exquisite sight made Ketan catch his breath. In the distance, other flat-topped hills were bathed in purple sheen that merged with their natural red and bronze. As the sun lowered and the shadows lengthened, it seemed as if the endless desert were some vast sea of moving color and lights. It flowed and surged against his senses until he had to turn his head away.

But before he did, he had seen it.

He had seen beyond that red and yellow desert and the mountains with their purple rims. He had seen an endless expanse and a needle peak thrusting up to break its bareness.

He pointed through a gap far across the desert. "It's over there," he said.

William Douglas started to speak and then closed his mouth silently. John Edwards only stared at Ketan and nodded.

They built a camp in a level clearing on the edge of the forest, and when they had eaten and the fire had nearly died they lay back and Ketan saw the stars.

That first night by the cave his senses had been too dulled to notice that they were more or brighter than in the cloud-laden skies of Kronweld. But now he saw them. He lay watching as a child might have watched, not amazed, not frightened, but accepting their wonder and their nearness as a part of a new world.

He turned to William Douglas who lay nearby with eyes looking far beyond the stars. "What are they? Does anyone know among your people?" Ketan asked.

"What are what?"

"Up there—those points of light."

"The *stars*?"

"Is that what you call them? I wonder if it would be possible to go high enough to see what they are."

William Douglas raised up on one arm and looked down at Ketan. "Do you mean that there are no stars visible in Kronweld? That you have no science of astronomy?"

"Only at rare, short intervals are such lights visible in Kronweld. We have wondered about them, but we know nothing of them. They have always been declared a Sacred Mystery."

"Stars." He repeated the word and it flowed upon his lips and tongue like some breath of exotic winds. Into it he put all the awe and wonder, dependence and fear that man had known since the first cave dwellers prayed to the gods of the rolling vastness of the sky and the first shepherds looked up to them at night with nameless pleading.

"Stars," he said. "They look as the name sounds. Do you know what they are?"

William Douglas partook of the mood that encompassed Ketan. "They are dreams," he said. "They are dreams and other lives and other homes and worlds where men are as they would be."

His eyes came back to earth and he looked across the dying coals to the eyes of the stranger from out of another world. His glance fell upon the narrow features, the thin nostrils and sharp, never resting eyes, the high smooth forehead. "You've got to go back, Ketan," he said. "This world will kill you."

"There are other worlds like this one?" Ketan persisted.

"Most of them are globes like our own sun. Some of them are other planets like this one. Many of those other suns have planets. There are probably more worlds like this one than you can number right in the range of your vision."

"Kronweld . . . Kronweld could be such a world, could be on one of those worlds, couldn't it?" Ketan breathed.

"I wonder—" said William Douglas.

When he at last slept, Ketan was still leaning on one arm, looking up at the stars.

Ketan did not think he had even been asleep when William Douglas began stirring again. The Illegitimate built up the fire and began breakfast.

"We've got to get an early start and put as much of that desert behind us as possible before the sun comes up," he said. "It'll be an oven there by noon."

The stars were still bright when they broke camp and wound their slow way down the mountainside. The sky was just beginning to glow in the east by the time they reached the desert floor.

A fringe of low clouds in the sky lighted up the world in a fire glow as they left the mountains behind them and then slowly the desert turned to a sea of yellow. It gave a sense of unreality as if they were moving upon a liquid surface lighted from below. They seemed to have stopped moving entirely, for the mountains ahead came no nearer, and those behind seemed not to retreat.

His companions were obviously uncomfortable in the rising warmth of the day, but it did not trouble Ketan. It was like many of Kronweld's days, and far less to endure than the inferno of Fire Land through which he had passed.

They stopped at a watering place at midday. The sun was overhead and so marked the passage of time, but to Ketan it seemed an illusion, for all time and all other experiences seemed lost upon this sea of yellow. We'll never reach the other side, he thought.

But by nightfall, they were nearing the gap in the mountains beyond and time resumed its flow. He knew that beyond that gap lay the greater desert where eternal winds blew and a single needle of rock pierced the sky.

"We'll camp outside," said John Edwards. "It's hell in there. I don't know whether we can make it in a day or not."

So near his goal, Ketan hardly slept that night. All the hopes and fears that he had known returned in an avalanche of emotion and garbled reasoning. Would he at last find out what the

mysterious visions meant? Would the pinnacle contain the explanation of the artificialties and unrealities of Kronweld?

Most of all, would it tell him how to go back—back to Elta?

He must have slept towards dawn again, for he was next aware of William Douglas preparing the fire. It was later now than the previous morning, and already the walls of the canyon were coloring like ripening fruit.

They resumed their way quickly and passed between the narrow gap with its towering walls. It was a short passage and after a single turn they glimpsed the distant end. It seemed as if a curtain of bronze were hung across it.

"That's it," said John Edwards, "and it's hell."

Then Ketan knew what it was. He was seeing it now, not in vision, but in reality. Beyond the mouth of the canyon was the desert, the desert of heaving, shifting, wind-borne sands. Hell, John Edwards called it. Ketan knew he had traversed it nearly a score of times.

The wind began to dip fingers into the canyon, sharp, golden fingers of sand that divided into yet a thousand other fingers and reached into their lungs and pierced their eyes and stung their skins. Half blinded by the lashing sand, they were not yet at the canyon's end.

John Edwards coughed and swung his horse around. "We'll have to wait," he gasped. "We'll never make it with that tornado blowing out there."

The other two pulled up, covering their faces against the sand blast.

"It's nearly always this way," said Ketan.

"What about it?" asked William Douglas. "Is there much chance of this wind dying down?"

"It never dies down. But it might let up a little," said John Edwards. "We could never find the pinnacle in that anyway. We couldn't see it twenty yards away."

"We could find it," said Ketan quietly. "I don't need to see it."

As unerringly as if a voice were guiding him, he knew that he could find it. He had done it before. He knew how it would be the instant they stepped out of the canyon's mouth.

"Are you sure of that?" William Douglas asked.

Ketan nodded.

He hesitated, then decided. "We may as well make a try for it. We haven't provisions enough for a long wait. I'm willing to believe that Ketan can take us there."

John Edwards made no comment. He didn't know or care much about Ketan and what mystic abilities he might have.

He was something strange, out of the Illegitimates' world. But John Edwards' devotion to William Douglas was strong. Whatever the leader of the Illegitimates decided upon was right with John Edwards. It was fortunate that William Douglas was there to bridge the gap between them, Ketan thought.

They wrapped their faces in rags moistened from their canteens and reined the horses about. The animals reluctantly faced into the wind that thrust into the canyon's mouth. Automatically Ketan now found himself in the lead. The others had given way to the instinct within him that they hardly dared trust.

The canyon walls became mere shadows only faintly darker than the sand mist about them. When they emerged from the mouth of the canyon they were never quite certain. They knew only that there came a sudden increase in intensity of the wind and the biting of the sand needles pierced deeper into their flesh.

The horses grew panicky in the blind, howling world of air and sand. It was only with difficulty that the riders maintained control. Ketan reined hard to keep his beast headed into the wind, but he had to let it go to keep its head down.

Thus, in their own silence, but amidst the howling of wind-driven sheets of sand, they rode on. It was a world of desolate, torturing night. Again Ketan felt that sense of lost time and motion, but a thousand times more intensified than out on the desert of the day before. Now he was in a world where motion was impossible, where time would never exist again. They were frozen in this timeless block of sand and air.

He turned to see if his companions were there. He could only see William Douglas a scant half length behind, but John Edwards was invisible. He hoped the other Illegitimate was still following.

He turned and tried to stare ahead, shielding his eyes from the blast. There was nothing. For a moment he let his thoughts absorb in introspection. Could he be sure they were headed right?

There was no doubt of it in his mind. As if an invisible guiding beam were trained upon his brain, he knew surely in what direction the pinnacle lay through the desert.

And as they went on, it seemed as if the gathering wisps of pre-science of all the past *tara* combined in a single mighty conviction of guiding forces that had led him through every incident of his living to this present moment. It was right. He was where these forces had led him, and now, presently, they would reveal themselves and all the reality of the interlocked

worlds that could be bridged by a pathway of light across the ages and through infinities.

There was no way of knowing where the sun was in the sky. It was only by the thickening of the gloom that they judged that night was coming. Yet it seemed incredible that a full day had passed even though the sand had seemed to beat upon them for an eternity.

And then it broke.

The curtain of swirling sand dropped as if melted in the sudden downpour of rain that fell upon them. The wind died with startling suddenness and water replaced the sand, falling in blinding sheets. But it was good.

They drew up together and halted and turned their faces up to it. They grinned at each other as the rain made little cascades in the furrows of their faces and carried with it the shattered cakes of sand that lay upon them.

"You were right about the thunderstorm," William Douglas said to John Edwards, "and am I glad!"

"Another hour of that and I'd have been gone. We lost two of the pack horses, did you know?"

William Douglas looked back. His face sobered. "That means a shorter stay. Do you know where we are, Ketan?"

Ketan pointed. They saw it simultaneously. Through the misty curtain of water that fell about them, they saw in the distance the single column that reached towards the sky.

The pinnacle.

A sudden unreasonable excitement took possession of Ketan for an instant. It was the realization that here before him was the object of a life-long quest. Here was the visioned rock whose image had been burned in his brain before ever his eyes beheld it.

"Come on," he said hoarsely.

The pinnacle was a single shaft of rock that seemed unbroken by the winds and frosts. It looked as eternal as the stars. The flat planes of its sides looked as if fashioned by the hands of the gods.

Even John Edwards was subdued by a sense of awe in the presence of the thing. "I'll bet no man has been this close to it for a thousand years," he murmured.

"Do you know what you expect to find, now?" asked William Douglas.

"Yes. Down near the base on the opposite side—"

He reined about. The feet of the horses padded upon the sand that was still powdery beneath the thin layer of mud. The thirst of the desert was hardly appeased by the thick rain.

It began to let up a little as they neared the pinnacle. Somehow the rock was larger than he had visioned it. William Douglas estimated it as two hundred feet in diameter and about six hundred feet high. Not another rise broke the flat expanse of sand as far as they could see.

The illusion of vast distance was partly due, they saw, to the slow rise of the desert sand that cut off the view of the Mesas behind them.

Ketan led them to the opposite side and gazed upward for a long moment at the wet sides of the rock. Its thick girth was striped with red and white and bronze layers like the distant Mesas.

John Edwards repeated his observation about the isolation of it. "If somebody wanted to hide anything, this would be a good place to put it."

But Ketan was not listening. He was surveying the surface of the rock in vain. He went to the other sides and scanned them. There was nothing there to mark the spot he searched for. He returned to his starting point and continued to stare up.

"It's not there—" he began. Then his eyes lighted. "It's down there," he exclaimed. "The sand has buried it."

"Buried what?" said William Douglas.

"The entrance," said Ketan.

It was obvious that the sand had drifted about the base of the pinnacle to a considerable depth, for it sloped down in a long slant that indicated an excavation of many feet if they had to go down to a point level with the general expanse of the desert.

But Ketan indicated that they would have to dig to a depth not much more than equal to their own height. The vision in his mind was of a marker far above his head when standing on the level.

The sudden torrent of rain was slowly dying, and they could see breaks in the dark, overcast sky. The wind was rising again, portending a resumption of the sandstorm which the rain had interrupted, but it would not be as bad with the thin layer of wet, caked sand on the surface.

Their packs contained an assortment of crude tools of the Illegitimate's own manufacture. They were fortunately on the animal which had not become lost in the storm. Ketan indicated the exact spot at which the digging should begin. There were no materials for shoring up the sides and as they dug they had to widen the mouth of the hole to account for the sand that constantly shifted down.

It was a wearying task, made miserable by the rising wind that swirled in the hole and limited the direction of shoveling so that only one man could work at a time. Night, too, was swiftly approaching and the lowering clouds were closing the gaps they had tentatively opened. It looked like a night of hurricane and rain.

At last John Edwards straightened from his frantic digging. He wiped his sand-caked face and looked at Ketan. "This is as far as you said it would be necessary to dig. But there's nothing yet. Are you sure this is right?"

"Yes. It's got to be there!" He leaped into the hole. "Let me try."

John Edwards relinquished the shovel and stepped out. He stood on the rim of the hole with William Douglas. "I think we ought to start back. There's nothing here. We can't keep these horses here without water, and it's suicide to try to camp here any length of time."

Ketan heard them. Their silhouettes were dimly visible on the rim of the hole above him, standing like scornful gods in judgment over him. He hoped they wouldn't go back, but he knew that if they did they would go without him.

It was too dark to see what he was doing, but he kept on throwing sand out blindly. The wind swept it back in upon him so that he was forced to dig almost with his eyes shut. He kept close to the rock wall of the pinnacle and his shovel struck the rock repeatedly so that the force of his labor was inefficiently expended.

Then suddenly he realized it wasn't just the wall that he was striking. It was a projection that jutted out from the wall.

He threw the shovel out and flung down upon his knees, clawing frantically with his fingers. His eyes couldn't see it, but his hands gave him the shape of the object and its size. And his fingers found the small hole above it.

"I've got it! Hand me that bar," he shouted up to the men.

William Douglas threw it down to him and leaned over to see what Ketan was doing. He thrust the bar into the hole and pried out the smoothly fitted pyramid of rock. It came easily, but nothing else happened. He looked up and down the surface in bewilderment. He had expected this to be the key that would open some passageway to them. There was just nothing at all.

Then William Douglas was shouting excitedly. "Down there —that light—in the hole!"

A faint, golden light was pouring out of the small opening, increasing rapidly in intensity. Ketan lay on his side, curling

his body into a knot in the bottom of the diggings to see into the hole in the rock.

He did not know what he expected to see. He was prepared for anything—anything but what he did see recessed there.

The light was coming from a tiny, glowing image, a golden image of a dancing girl poised on one foot. The figure was carved with an exquisite reality that made him expect it to burst into motion.

Before his senses fully recorded an impression of the image he knew he had seen it before. Seen it nearly every day of his life since his birth into Kronweld.

It was a delicate miniature of the golden image of the First Woman that stood in the grounds before the Temple of Birth.

"What is it?" William Douglas and John Edwards stood impatiently on the rim of the excavation.

Slowly, Ketan climbed out of the hole and motioned them down. "See for yourselves," he said.

In turn, they jumped down and took a look at the tiny figure in the recess, while on the rim, Ketan stood staring into space. He was seeing Kronweld, the Temple of Birth, the fluttering curtains of purple light in the night sky over that distant world.

And he was seeing the golden, dancing image of the First Woman.

How was it possible for a miniature of that image to be here on Earth?

William Douglas rose slowly from his crouching position. "That's the most beautiful sculptoring I've seen for a long time—and to think of finding it here in this desert. Any idea what it means, Ketan?"

He told them of the original in Kronweld.

William Douglas whistled softly. "That *is* something. How long does your history say that the image has been there? In Kronweld, I mean."

"We have a record of a thousand *tara* since the First Woman came there. The image is supposed to have been there almost all of that time."

"A thousand *tara*. I wonder how many of our years that is."

"As near as I can tell, it would be about twelve hundred of your years."

The Illegitimate turned back to the hole where he could still see the light from the image glowing faintly. "And that must have been there equally as long. I wonder how it got there. Who put it there—and most of all, why?"

John Edwards was not so impressed. "Is that all we came to find? Let's get going if it is."

"No," said William Douglas. "There must be something more. This has no meaning by itself. What do you think, Ketan?"

"I don't know what to think. There's something more here, I'm sure, but what it is, I have no idea."

"You spoke of an entrance—"

"There should be one. All I know is that the small projecting pyramid should be removed. I thought that would open the way. I'm going to look again."

He went down into the hole and crouched, staring at the tiny image. Then he reached in a hand to touch it. It was merely resting there in delicate balance on one tiny foot. He lifted it up and out of the recess, its self-contained glowing lighting the hole in the sand with its golden light.

And then the sand beneath him collapsed.

As suddenly as if a cloak had been thrown about him, Ketan vanished from the sight of the two Illegitimates.

"Ketan!" William Douglas shouted into the hole. There was no sound, but the slithering of hundreds of pounds of sand.

"Ketan!"

Then as from far away came Ketan's faint cry. "Come here, quick!"

William Douglas poised on the edge of the digging. John Edwards touched a hand to his arm. "Do you think it's safe?"

"I'll go first. If everything's all right, I'll call to you. If you don't hear me, take it easy. Don't jump in after until you know what it's all about."

"I don't like this—"

But William Douglas was gone. He leaped into the hole and slid down the sandy wall. But he didn't stop where the bottom of the digging ended. He plunged on through into a tunnel of blackness that was fouled with the dust of sliding sand.

But it was short. He ended abruptly upon a stone floor.

Ketan was standing as if turned to stone. He did not even notice William Douglas' arrival, but continued in motionless stance a little distance away.

And then William Douglas rose and stood still.

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THEY WERE STANDING IN A SORT OF ALCOVE. DARK, ROUGH-HEWN rocks marked the walls and ceiling about them, though the floor on which they stood was smooth.

But it was not this that they stared upon. It was the scene beyond. They were looking into a garden where strange pink and yellow and blue flowers nodded in a faint breeze that bore their fragrance to the men. There was a pool in the center with a fine spray rising into the air and a pair of birds were noisily bathing in it. Beyond, tall trees waved in the wind, against a sky where floating clouds drifted softly and melted even as the men watched.

They had not mind or voice for words. William Douglas was dimly conscious of John Edwards' frantic calling from above, but he could find no voice to breathe the wonder of the mirage before them.

He knew that it was a mirage, a product of some mental aberration that had seized them, but he couldn't fight it off. And then in a moment he ceased all desire to.

There was a movement among the tall flowers beyond the pool and a figure came into view. It was a girl walking slowly towards them.

Her head was high and there was a smile for them on her lips. They could see the wind touch her raven black hair and stir the folds of her dress whose pink matched the most delicate of the flowers.

And then she spoke, but Ketan did not grasp her words. His mind was in a tumult that made speech impossible. Perhaps he had not even heard. He only continued to stare in disbelief. And then William Douglas saw it, too.

The girl was the living replica of the miniature that Ketan still held tightly in his hand. She was the First Woman.

"Welcome to the repository," she said. "We've been expecting you. Please follow me. My father is waiting for you."

It was the sound of her voice and her words that struck

another impact to the men's consciousness, for the words she spoke were in Ketan's language rather than William Douglas'. Yet it was a strangely unfamiliar form. Her pronunciation was not as it should have been. And the word forms were partially obsolete.

Ketan gave up his wonder. His mind went back to the control of his vocal cords and he answered her.

"I am Ketan. This is William Douglas," he said. "And this—" They realized for the first time that John Edwards was not with them. William Douglas returned to the opening and called up for their companion to come down.

Muttering under his breath, John Edwards complied cautiously. "I thought you'd fallen into a booby trap and killed yourselves. I was just about to shovel in the hole and go back." Then he, too, stopped and stared in wonder.

"What in—?"

The girl seemed puzzled. "How many of you are there this time?"

"Three. This time—? You mean there have been others?" Ketan asked.

"Many others, but come, my father will be waiting for you."

"It isn't real. It can't be," John Edwards whispered hoarsely as the girl turned and they moved to follow her. He had not even noticed her resemblance to the golden image in his first mystification.

Simultaneously, the two Illegitimates turned to Ketan. "What does it mean?" William Douglas asked. "She isn't real, is she? This must be more of the visions that you told us about, and it's affecting us all. This rock has been sealed for over a thousand years. No one could be alive in it. Can you understand what she says? I can't get more than about a third of it."

"It's rather an old form of Kronweldian. I don't know any more about the explanation of all this than you do. I only know that whatever it is, is right. This is what I came to find."

They followed in silence behind the girl whose walk seemed to be more of a graceful, dancing motion. They passed through the garden beside the fountains. They noticed fish swimming lazily. Strange, golden-hued fish.

The illusion of distance was perfect—or was it illusion? As far as they could see there were gardens with flowers and trees spreading over the low hills in the distance. A flock of birds passed high over them and in the distance a rainshower spotted the sky.

The garden path took them shortly into a wooden glen and they began an abrupt ascent of a comparatively high hill.

There was a strange sense of fantastic unreality about that hill. Even more than about the rest of their surroundings.

Then they found what caused it. There seemed to be no top to the hill. It just kept going and there was no visible pathway ahead of them, yet the girl did not hesitate.

And then they reached the top.

The hill and the garden and the sky vanished and they strode out upon the marble floor of a high hallway down which the girl was leading them. Her shoes clicked upon the floor in multiple echoes that sounded like the beating of faraway fairy drums. Her grace was deceptive in covering the swiftness of her motion and they had to hurry to keep up with her.

Their capacity for astonishment had long since passed and they did not wonder at the sudden transformation from the garden to the marble way.

They turned a corner abruptly and came to a high-ceilinged room finished luxuriously in panels of blood-brown mahogany. In the center of the room was a table at which candles burned. Upon it was a sumptuous feast.

It was not until a moment later that they noticed the man seated at the table. He rose slowly as they entered and the girl led them towards the man.

"This is my father, Richard Simons," she said. "These men are Ketan, William Douglas, and—"

"John Edwards," said Ketan, indicating the man who had come in last.

"I'm happy to know you, gentlemen," said Richard Simons. "It has indeed been a long time that we have waited for you. Will you sit down and refresh yourselves, and then we can talk?"

None of the food was recognizable to any of them. The two Illegitimates were dubious about it, but Ketan knew that it was merely some unknown varieties of synthetic preparations, such as were known on Kronweld. He found the dishes very satisfying.

But during the meal, neither the man nor the girl would discuss the things that were burning in the minds of the three men. There was no word of explanation or comment.

They chatted easily of inconsequential things, however. Simons told them about the garden below or *out*, or wherever it was. He told about the plants that he had gathered from all the countries of the world to put in it. Then he spoke in pride of the room in which they sat, of the mahogany panels which he prized.

There was yet a strangeness about the two that Ketan could

not name, an elusive quality as if the man and the girl were actually unaware of them, yet that did not seem to be it, either. They looked directly into the men's faces and smiled and laughed as they chatted.

In fact, they monopolized most of the conversation, hardly allowing the three men to say a word. It was as if all the unspoken thoughts of centuries of imprisonment within the pinnacle were pouring out.

But Ketan could not help bursting out with questions. Some were answered and some—

That was it. Every now and then in their conversation they completely ignored statements or questions put by the men. It seemed as if they had not heard or chose not to recognize what was said to them. Ketan wondered if they were partially deaf.

After the meal, Richard Simons passed around cigars which Ketan did not recognize, but the two Illegitimates accepted with pleasure. Then he led them out into another richly furnished room which was a library.

The high walls were stacked to the ceilings with thousands of volumes. The expanse of the shelves was broken by several excellent paintings. The deep gray floor coverings muffled all sounds and it seemed as if a whisper were sufficient for conversation in that room.

They sat in deep, comfortable chairs and Richard Simons blew a ring of smoke towards the ceiling.

"You want explanations, of course," he said. "You want to know who we are, and what all this means. I shall answer all your questions in an orderly manner.

"First, let me tell you that you will find it hard to believe many of the things which you shall learn here, but believe that what we say is true. We wish that most of it weren't.

"You came because we wished you to come. You could not have done otherwise. When you passed through the Selector an impulse was planted in your mind which carried you from that moment to this. All your life has been lived with the objective in mind of your coming to this point. I hope it has not caused you a great deal of discomfort, but I had to be sure you would come."

He was speaking of Ketan, of course, but his glance seemed to encompass the two Illegitimates as well.

So that was the source of the visions, Ketan thought. And that was the origin of the driving force that had impelled and guided him here. But why?

Apparently their host was ready to answer this. "It is dif-

ficult to know where to begin," he said. "You must know, first of all, that this is your home. You are of Earth. Crown World has been only a temporary setting for you and now you are about to come home."

Crown World, Ketan thought. That was the oldest of all forms by which Kronweld was known. He wondered why the man used it, or how he knew of it.

"You should know a good deal of the past history of Earth in order to understand the purpose of all of this. I am not going to tell you that history. You will find the details of it in these books that surround us, during the next few days.

"To sketch a background, however, you should know that there was a time when science and civilization were much greater than they are now. They were destroyed by a great war that encompassed the Earth in a series of destructions that extended over a hundred years. It was really all one war, but it was broken up by truces and armistices which the people used to rearm and prepare for greater and more destructive wars that followed.

"Because of the high state of the science of that day, these wars were increasingly destructive, until such a cumulative destroying power arose that it became impossible for civilization to continue in the face of it. And civilization did not continue.

"There came, in time, the wiping out of the capacity for technological production. It was not a single climactic event, of course, but as technical facilities broke down one after another, they were replaced with more and more primitive conditions until an almost stone-age culture followed. Simultaneously, this meant the end of world war, because facilities for transportation and communication were gone.

"A generation grew up fighting with knives and axes and communicating by smoke signals and runners. And, in the end, they forgot what they were fighting for and stopped because all their energies went into the killing of food.

"You will perhaps find these conditions unbelievable, but I assure you they existed for many decades.

"The upswing that followed came rapidly because there were still technicians of a sort in existence, and the rudiments of science could be salvaged out of the ruins of the libraries and laboratories. Fragment by fragment, portions of it came back. But something had happened to the people. They didn't want their science back. A wave of feeling seemed to sweep around the world into all lands almost simultaneously. It became a dogma, a religion, and science became the scapegoat

for which the inhabitants who were left after wars blamed their fate. They blamed science and technique and they called their new cult *antimaterialism.*

"It was a fantastic, fanatic thing, but it gripped the Earth. In order to create communication systems again, they were forced into the contradictory position of adopting certain of the hated techniques, but they justified it by some sort of sanctification hokum. What they actually did, then and there, was prove that no society of any complexity and culture whatever can develop without a parallel science or technique to service it.

"But, in the meantime, it was impossible for those of us who believed in the restoration of technique to proclaim our views. Hundred of us were killed for it and the rest driven into hiding."

Ketan leaned forward. "*Us*? Did you take part in those events?"

Their strange host nodded. "Do not be surprised at that. I shall explain shortly."

"We fought for years," he continued, "for the restoration of science. But we knew at last that it was impossible in that generation. There was only one thing to do, and that was put our knowledge and science in storage and prepare for the future. That is what we did."

He learned back and gazed up at the high ceiling while drawing a final gust from the stub of his cigar.

"We came here and built all this." He waved a hand to include the pinnacle and all its contents. That was more than a thousand years ago. A dozen years after we completed our task, all of us were dead."

His eyes were watching the three men with amusement. The two Illegitimates leaned forward with a start, but incapable of uttering a sound.

Ketan did not move. He had been waiting for that. Back in the dining room he had sensed the unreality of the pair, without daring to voice it. But if he gave no outward sign of reaction to the man's statement, there was a deeper, more poignant sense of loss.

It swept over him like a great wave of some immeasurably lonely sound. It swelled through the great chamber of the library and echoed and reverberated out through the marble halls and vast chambers he sensed but had not seen.

Dead was the one word that went with that lonely melody. Dead, this pinnacle and all that it holds. Dead, this great unknown Seeker—and the First Woman.

Ketan looked into her eyes. There were depths of sadness there that spoke wordlessly to him, but then her lips moved, and he could hardly hear what she said.

"Yes, dead. I wish I might know you," she said. "I wonder what you are like as you sit here beside us—a thousand years from now, when we are only lights and shadows and recorded sounds. Are you primitive savages who have come to rend all that we have tried to save and plunge the world forever into night? Perhaps not, because we prepared protection against such.

"Or are you sensitive creatures of intellect to whom we have given survival and of whom we could be proud if we could see you? We shall never know, but we died hoping."

There was moistness in her eyes as she looked away.

All the poignancy and hope in her heart communicated itself to Ketan. It was like a vision of the dead sitting beside her, watching her movements, and listening to her voice. Every day of his life he had passed the thousand-*tara*-old image of her before the Temple of Birth. Now to see her alive—even if only in illusion—was like waking in the midst of a dream and finding it real.

He imagined the fearful task she undertook when she went alone to Kronweld with the first of those selected by her father's machine to begin life in that world. How lonely the years must have been while she watched the little ones grow. When they were old they must have built the image from a duplicate of the key to the pinnacle which she had taken with her.

But the one question not yet answered was the sterility of Kronweld. Why had life never reproduced itself there?

Richard Simons began speaking again. "It is obvious what was necessary," he said. "Those of us who were left—about five hundred—gathered a sample of every scrap of technical and scientific knowledge we could find. I started with the job long before she was born." He nodded towards the girl. "But she grew up to help finish the job. We located this pinnacle in what looked like the safest spot on Earth. The perpetual winds, which our geologists assured us would not materially affect the rock in five thousand years, and which our meteorologists said would be continuous until the peculiar formation that makes them possible disappeared, form a natural barrier. But it is one that can be easily penetrated if there is a good enough reason for doing so.

"A good many of us lived here until our numbers were gradually depleted by death. We would have gone into Kron-

weld to escape as we planned for you to escape, but there was too much undone work, so we remained. Only Dorien went through to end her life in Crown World, among the first of those we sent through.

"This half of our problem was only a half. The remainder is for you to solve, and if you have not solved it, or know that you cannot do so, then you must go back to Crown World and never return. In another thousand years another will follow in your steps, but that is my charge to you: Solve the second problem or go back!"

The man's eyes took on a strange, steely glint that somehow carried a nameless threat, a conviction that he could yet reach out across the millennium and enforce any demands he might make.

"And that problem is—?"

"The problem is the oldest problem of society. How can man be governed?

"Here is what we did for you: We appealed to the war revulsion of the people and constructed a series of great machines which we told them would forever eliminate such great criminals as had led the world to destruction in times past. We pointed out what changes there would have been in the world if such as Alexander, Nero, Attila, Hitler, Michoven, Drurila and the hosts like them could have been examined at birth and their criminal tendencies discovered and destroyed without giving them a chance at life.

"With their usual facility for turning their faces the other way when a good machine contrary to their teachings appeared, the antimaterialists accepted our Selector, as we called it, and we installed it in numerous locations throughout the world. All the minor instruments were controlled by the large central machine.

"We did incorporate circuits which identified and destroyed potential criminal leaders, but we included other circuits, too. These latter selected and rejected the scientific brains, the men and women who could have led the world to new heights of achievement in proper circumstances, but who would have lived and died in a world of frustration and futility among the antimaterialists if they had remained on Earth. You were among those.

"This isolation was made possible by the discovery of one of our group that there exist parallel worlds in which the oscillation rates of the component particles making up their atoms differ. You won't understand that, neither do I. There's probably only one man in the world who ever did understand

it, and now he's dead. His records are here, though, if you want them.

"What he did discover was that perfectly 'normal' matter can be changed with respect to the frequencies of its component oscillations and be coexistent in space with other matter of differing frequencies.

"It all adds up to the fact that we found a hundred thousand other worlds lying side by side, so to speak, with our own. Some of them were terrible, ghastly worlds, with forms of life that would haunt a man all his days. Only a dozen or so were fit for human life, and the best of these, which was none too good, we called Crown World and sent our selected, chosen intellects there. How well it worked you know better than I.

"It had always been a theory of mine that if a hundred of the best scientific minds of the world could be isolated on an island away from all influence of the ignorant and the politicians that they would cover a thousand years of scientific progress in a tenth of the normal, historical time.

"I believe that now, a thousand years or so later, such a society of scientists has evolved and progressed further than the wildest dreams of my own day. I gave you nothing to start with. I sent none, even, of the basic sciences of Earth for you to build upon. I wanted you to build both your own foundation and superstructure. All that you have done is ours and yours alone.

"Now, the second problem is for you to come back and govern the world which is your rightful home—if you can. If you are prepared, and if it is ready, as I believe it should be, take it over, rule it, make it the paradise that it might have been long ago except for the greed of the ignorant and the warriors and the politicians. Rule as you see fit, but if you are not fully prepared to rule wisely, go back and wait another thousand years. That is your commission.

"And that is all for tonight. Dorien will lead you to your rooms and you may rest. Think over what I have said. Tomorrow, we will talk again."

A thousand questions flooded Ketan's mind, but the girl, Dorien, had already arisen and was leading the way out. The figure of the man was silent and motionless as if life had been suddenly turned off within it.

They came out of the library into another hallway, thick-rugged and dimly lighted by a luminescent ceiling. Dorien led them to three doors adjacent to one another and bade them good night.

"I think you will find everything you need," she said. "You will find a message left there for you by the first who came back. Read it carefully."

The two Illegitimates had not understood more than a third of the words that were spoken. They understood only vaguely the import of the story of Richard Simons. As soon as the girl was gone, they came into Ketan's room.

"What's it all about?" said William Douglas. "We didn't get very much of it. Could you understand it all?

Ketan briefly filled in the gaps they had missed. As he went along, the eyes of the Illegitimates glowed. They were silent a moment, then William Douglas spoke.

"This is the thing we have waited a lifetime for. You will come back—all of you from Kronweld and take over from the Statists?"

Ketan nodded. "Apparently it is our destiny. Most certainly we shall come back to Earth, to the home that was originally ours. It is much more desirable than Kronweld.

"But there are many problems yet to clear up. Many I think that they didn't plan for. Returning to our rightful place may not be as simple as it sounds."

"Of course not. The Statists will fight, but a hundred thousand Illegitimates all over the world will fight with you. Just give us leadership, bring us the weapons we've tried to build and can't. You can lead the world back to the Utopia that these ancient scientists visioned. It's the dream the Illegitimates have dreamed for three generations, but they never actually believed it would be possible."

"We'll come back," said Ketan with finality, "but first I must learn such a simple thing as how to get back to Kronweld."

"We'll help you," said William Douglas. "I can show you the way, now."

As he lay in darkness, Ketan thought of Dorien's statement that many had been there before them. That thought confused and worried him.

If there had been others who had been charged with the same commission, what had become of them? Then he remembered the message the girl had said was left by the first one who came through. He got out of bed and snapped on the lights. The folder was lying on a table near the bed. He opened it up.

"You know now the mission of the inhabitants of the world of Kronweld," it read. "Because you are one of those with the power and imagination sufficient for the task ahead, you were

chosen by the great Seekers of old to come through. They planned well for us and their heritage of knowledge will be a great asset, but there were a thousand problems that they did not anticipate.

"The greatest of these is the rise of such a group as the Statists. They did not plan any way to take the governing power away from such, therefore, we cannot proceed as we would like.

"You may or may not know who the Statists are by now. They are a group of tyrannical rulers who hold power by reason of the fact that they long ago learned of the existence of Kronweld. Whether by accident or betrayal, I do not know. The Statists themselves apparently do not know. But they were clever enough to infiltrate into the world of Kronweld without revealing themselves as strangers, and, through the medium of the Temple of Birth, they have fed upon our Seeking for well over two hundred years.

"They are not like us, however. They are utterly ignorant of the basic principles of our science. As you have learned, the inhabitants of Earth have been skimmed, so to speak, of the scientific brains that have been born there during the last thousand years or more. This means that those left upon Earth have existed in an incredibly dark and ignorant era. Those of the Statists who have stolen and used our work are inept and almost stupid in the technique necessary to use our discoveries. Their only salvation has been the fact that none of their own have been submitted to the Selector and, as a result, any technical traits remaining among them—which were few enough after centuries of skimming—are now preserved. A number of good technicians exist among the Statists now.

"A crisis has long been approaching because they fear Kronweld. Somehow there has come among them a legend of the pinnacle. They have searched long and in vain for it and they believe that if Kronweld should ever learn of it and come through, the Statists would be wiped out, which is, of course, true.

"The problem is not simple. There are many of us who have come through, now. You will learn who and where we are in good time. Come to the city, Danfer, and you will meet me there and obtain further instruction and information.

"I am Igon."

Ketan read the last line and put the folder down before the significance of that name thundered into his consciousness.

Igon!

The legendary Seeker of Kronweld who had first broken through into Fire Land and Dark Land and had nearly lost his life and been declassed for it! Igon—so fantastic, so mythical that many doubted that he had ever existed. It was at least eighty *tara* since he had disappeared from Kronweld.

It was impossible that he could still be alive. The paper of the message was *old*. But even if Igon were dead, what had become of his plans and all the others who had come through to conquer the Statists and reclaim Earth? Where were they?

19

HE TOSSED IN RESTLESSNESS THROUGH THE NIGHT. HIS MIND would not relinquish the multitude of interlocking problems.

He tried to go over what he knew in an orderly manner. Leader Hoult and Teacher Daran obviously had been Statists who had taken Kronweld's Seeking back to Earth for the Statist group. They had used the superstition surrounding the Temple of Birth as a cloak for their work.

And that, he thought, was about all he knew for certain. It left him uncertain as to where Matra had stood. Apparently she was opposed to the Statists, but had she been one of them to begin with if the Temple were the channel for returning the stolen knowledge? And what of Anetel? She must be a Statist or at least aligned with them, he decided.

That left Elta. It was impossible to come to a decision regarding her. He didn't want to believe that Matra's original accusations were true, but there seemed no other explanation. The only favorable factor was Matra's strange reversal of opinion just before she died. And Elta's insane attack upon Anetel.

These thoughts swirled in his mind until dawn broke with a burst of light through the window by his bed. A dawn as dreamy and unreal as all the other surroundings of the pinnacle interior. He rose more weary than when he went to bed, and looked about the room in close inspection for the first time. He saw what appeared to be bathing facilities and approached to find out how they worked.

He discovered the shower controls after a moment and

stepped under the invigorating stream. It was only water, he found, but it was good even if not so refreshing as the chemical sprays he was accustomed to.

He found an assortment of clothing in a closet, and debated using some of it that approached his fit, but he decided to redress in the durable skin garments of the Illegitimates.

When he was through, the door opened and Richard Simons entered the room.

"Good morning," he said. "I hope you slept well."

"Hardly. There have been too many surprises the last few days."

"I can understand that. But surprises are not yet at an end. We have many things to show you."

It was strange, talking thus, holding conversation with a man dead a thousand *tara*. Ketan could not shake off the eeriness of it. Rather, it was growing on him.

"The thing I am most concerned with is getting back to Elta," he said.

Again there was that expression of utter blankness and incomprehension on the man's face. Obviously, Elta was not a name that would actuate any of the multitude of recorded responses. While he stood there, Ketan moved forward and passed his hand clear through the man's midriff.

"Yes," Richard Simons smiled ruefully. "I am nothing but light and shadow and sound—and certain other radiant effects that make it possible to pick up things and exert pressure. But it is best this way, is it not? I think you would rather have me conduct you about in this manner than listen to only the sound of my voice in these empty halls."

"Much rather," said Ketan.

He started out the doorway. "Do not think of me as one dead. Though my body disintegrated a millennium ago, I have guided you here. I have governed your life to the extent of leading you to a great destiny. I cannot be dead if I am capable of that, can I?"

"No . . . no, you can't." And Ketan suddenly knew that what the man said was true. This hall, this pinnacle, its precious storage of the science of his home world—none of it was dead. It was the most vitally living creation in all this dim and dying world. It was a spark of life that would infuse itself into Kronweld, and unite the two worlds in a glory of existence that no man had ever dared dream of. No man is ever dead, thought Ketan, who can still guide the lives of others through his works.

They were joined by the two Illegitimates who looked as

if they had rested much better than had Ketan. There was a reason why they should. They saw ahead the end of all their problems and the fulfillment of the hopes of their nation. Ketan saw only the beginning of his.

In a moment they were joined by Dorien who was dressed this morning in a trim, white garb that set off her ebon, flowing hair with intense contrast.

"Where are you taking them?" she asked her father.

"I thought we'd go down to the laboratory this morning. They must see our collection there."

"Our wax museum—" Dorien laughed.

"Dorien, please—"

It was evident that the girl had an easy familiarity with their work which was not shared by Richard Simons. He was intensely serious, as Ketan knew he well might be, over the importance of what they were doing. But Ketan was glad that Dorien was able to laugh. It made them all feel better.

They wound through passages and down moving stairways, until Ketan made no attempt to keep track of where they were going. He ceased all wonder about the relative size of the interior and exterior of the pinnacle.

They came at last upon a balcony that overlooked an enormous chamber below. There must have been two thousand men at least, working over laboratory tables and masses of equipment built up on the floor. Some few were in groups, but most of them seemed to be working alone and in silence except for the click of glassware as equipment was set up or dismantled.

"What are they doing?" Ketan exclaimed. "I thought there was no one here, but yourselves."

Richard Simons remained silent for a moment. "These men are like us—Dorien and I. But they are no more dead than we, for their work has influenced a million million lives—and will influence yours and billions more. These are the scientists of Earth, the greatest of them, who discovered most of the knowledge that man had mastered up to the time of the building of the repository here in the pinnacle. Come down and meet some of them."

There was a strange appearance about the group of workers in the room. They were dressed in a variety of garbs that lent them all a weird incongruity.

Richard Simons led the way towards a corner where a white-haired old man, clad in a simple white robe, sat before a rough table scrawling on a rough, brownish substance.

"His name is Archimedes," said Richard Simons. "He is trying to improve an ontager for the battle of Syracuse."

The old man looked up at the sound of their voices. There was a dreamy look in his eyes, mingled with the worry and fear there.

"If I could only stand a hundred thousand men in one place, what power I would have," he murmured.

"Why men?" Ketan burst out. "You could use—"

Richard Simons touched Ketan's arm gently. "He wouldn't understand. He is Archimedes as he was. Nothing but the power of men and animals and heat and falling objects was known in his day. Come over to a later era. This man's name is Michael Faraday. He discovered the principle of electric current generation."

A thin-faced man of medium build looked up as they approached. He was in shirt sleeves and knee-length pants. His neatly waved mat of white hair looked somehow artificial to Ketan.

"Hello, Richard," he said.

"Hello, Michael. You look a bit annoyed this morning."

"Annoyed! I gave a lecture last night and some fool woman came up after the demonstration and asked what this was good for." He pointed towards a disk fitted with a crank that would spin it between the tips of a horn-shaped piece of metal."

Michael Faraday chuckled. "Can you guess what I told her? I said, 'Madam, can you tell me what a new born baby is good for? She left me without another word."

They chuckled with him and turned away.

"I want you to know them," said Richard Simons. "Come here often. Talk to all of them. They can understand you because their language has been adjusted to yours, though originally they spoke a hundred different ones.

"I want you to find out what they are doing, and why. Here are the men who tried to raise a world up to the stars, and failed because of the ignorance and stupidity that blocked their way. I want you to learn from them, because you must go the same path and succeed where they failed.

"They will always be here, working over and over upon the things that the world remembered them for, and for which they still live. There's Edison over there, trying to hear his phonograph with a slightly deaf ear. Sometimes he turns it on so loud that it annoys Einstein across the table. Get to know them all. They're my friends, and the friends of every man."

Up on the balcony again, Ketan looked down upon the as-

semblage of figures that represented the great Seekers of a world. He knew that the scientists who had built this replica and created these figures had not done so for idle show. Here was something of paramount importance for the Seekers of Kronweld who were yet to come.

They would meet and know the Seekers of Earth as if they had worked with them, and they would learn their dreams and ambitions and gain strength to carry them out.

"Now the library," said Richard Simons.

They passed through other corridors and came to a long, narrow room with a table that would seat over a hundred men. Upon the table, before each seat was a small view plate and a keyboard of colored and numbered buttons.

"Behind these walls," said Richard Simons, "are the photographic records of a hundred million books. This was our greatest task. We spent the majority of our time, secretly roaming the world, salvaging the books that men had written. Because there were so many copies of each, they could not all be destroyed even by the tremendous bombing and burning of the wars. We preserved them on film, and then built this library.

"A manual index indicates to you what is available on any given subject. Then, with the indicated index number, you order that film automatically fitted into your viewing machine. Thus, you may sit in one of these positions here and read any of the one hundred million volumes with only a few seconds required to change from one to another.

"We planned that this room should some day be filled with scientists from Crown World day and night, learning the heritage of their homeland."

Ketan sat down at a position and experimentally pushed a series of buttons. In a moment the screen lighted with the image of a page. He found it difficult to read.

That vastness of the accumulated writings awed him. More than one man's lifetime would be required to investigate even a fraction of what was stored there.

He was about to speak, but Richard Simons went on, "There is one other chamber that you must see this morning, our museum."

It was adjacent to the library. Like the library it was so vast in extent that it would not allow a vision of details. There were samples of hoarded machines and artifacts representing every art of ancient man. Machines of transportation, communication, manufacture—the scientists had gathered

them out of the ruins of a world for a testimony of the once great heights to which man had risen.

"It is too much!" exclaimed Ketan. "I have seen more than enough. There is no purpose in my viewing more of the remains of my home world. Let me go back to Kronweld, and bring Kronweld here to these things."

"Then follow the way that Igon has prepared," said Richard Simons. "Do not fail!"

Before he left, Ketan went back to the first library and made a selection of volumes to take to Kronweld as evidence of the story he would have to tell.

Like emerging from paradise into hell, they went out into the desert again, where the sky was smoky with sand and the sun blurred by it.

They found their horses hobbled and tethered. They were protected by heavy blanketing of some unknown texture, and they had been watered and fed. Ketan and the Illegitimates did not stop to ponder the miracle. It was the final manifestation of the pinnacle.

They replaced the tiny golden image in the recess and balanced it as before. The huge stone plug that had fallen away slowly swung down and blocked the opening once more. They shoveled the sand back over the projecting pyramid.

The sky was hot and burning through the shield of sand clouds. They covered their faces with moistened rags and turned back towards the gap between the Mesas. Unerringly, Ketan's direction sense in relation to the pinnacle led them back along the way they had come. Because they had started very late, it was near morning when they reached the canyon gap that led out of the drifting sands into the mildness of that other desert.

"We may as well stop and rest for the day," John Edwards suggested. "If we travel at night, it will be cooler. It looks like it's a furnace out there now."

William Douglas and Ketan agreed. They felt the need of rest, and Ketan, in spite of the urgency of his mission, wanted time to think.

It was William Douglas who was the most impatient. "What do you intend to do next, Ketan? What did those writings say?"

They were sitting by the campfire eating their evening meal. "Those instructions were written by Igon who disappeared from Kronweld over ninety years ago. Whatever validity they had then is surely gone now. Igon is undoubtedly

dead. If there is an organization of those who have come from Kronweld to the pinnacle, I am supposed to contact them, but I wonder if they haven't been discovered by the Statists and defeated long ago. Surely there would have been some evidence of their action by now. Igon would have carried a plan into effect during his lifetime if it were physically possible."

"But the instructions wouldn't have remained in the pinnacle if they were no longer effective."

"There is no reason why they should have been removed. After all, everything there is only mechanical in operation. Apparently Igon went through there and managed to make some progress towards a plan. Then he went back to the pinnacle and left these instructions, altering the controls on the images of Richard Simons and his daughter so that they would bring the instructions to the attention of any who came after him. He died and his plan failed, and the instructions merely remained."

William Douglas shook his head. "I hardly think it is as simple as that. Those images were set up too well. If they could respond to the unexpected questions and statements of conversation as they did, surely they would have better control over circumstances surrounding the instructions. What did they tell you to do?"

"I am to go to the city of Danfer where the central Selector is located. There I am to meet Igon—which is obviously impossible. If he were alive, I would receive further instruction there."

"Perhaps he is alive in the same sense that Richard Simons is."

"I've thought of that, but if he is nothing but a walking image of light and sound, he can't be an effective force in overthrowing the Statists."

"Maybe that's your job."

"I don't knew. If so, what happened to the others who came through?"

"At any event, you are going?"

"I am going back to Kronweld," said Ketan. "That is the first concern I have now. I am going to find Elta if she is alive. If she is not, I'll spend my life avenging her death if I have to destroy Kronweld and Earth to do it."

"I will go with you to Danfer then. That is the only way back to Kronweld. Perhaps you will find something more of this Igon, there. It is fortunate that you received a brand

as you went through the Selector. They won't question you on that count, anyway."

Ketan glanced down at the purple mark upon his arm, about which he had so often wondered, and nodded.

During that night, while they rode slowly across the desert, and the next night when they went back into the hills, Ketan was assailed by a sense of futility as if all he could do now were in a lost cause.

He traced the feeling to the episode in the pinnacle, to the discovery that the great and legendary Igon had passed that way at least eighty *tara* before—and obviously failed to carry out the mission assigned to him. If Igon had failed, how could Ketan hope to succeed in that task?

One slight possibility that offered hope was that Igon had seen the impossibility of accomplishing the task and had not tried, but waited for another to be assigned to it at a more opportune time. That seemed unreasonable, however, in view of the instructions he had left. Possibly they had tried and failed. Possibly a great number had come through the pinnacle and had produced a mighty effort to overthrow the Statists and reclaim Earth—and failed.

These were only more unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions to be added to the ones already piled upon him. He searched in his mind and in his heart for a course of action to follow.

When he placed the question directly to himself, devoid of all emotional response, it became clear that his way was as plainly marked before him now as it had been from Kronweld to the pinnacle. He wondered if some influence still were upon him, guiding him.

He would go first to the forest villages of the Illegitimates to rest and prepare for the journey to Danfer and to enlist the aid of the Illegitimates. He had to have them as allies. He had to have their faith and independence and devotion to freedom to mix with the passivity and Seeking of Kronweld.

He would go then to Danfer, find a way to go through to Kronweld. He would find Elta, but regardless of her fate, he would carry out his original intention of exposing and destroying the Temple of Birth. He would show it for what it was: Merely a gateway back to the world from which they had come.

Kronweld would be convinced then. They could not cry down the evidence he had to show them. He was sure of

that. With the aid of the Unregistereds he would be sure of convincing Kronweld.

That was the course, then. He would lead his people back to Earth. At the pinnacle and in the villages of the Illegitimates, they would learn of their heritage. They would plan together, not just he alone, how they could overthrow the Statists.

It did not seem so difficult. Once he had outlined the course in his mind, it seemed certain of fulfillment, and a new, uplifting elation filled him.

But it did not last for long. If the problem were that easy, why had Igon failed?

20

THEY TRAVELED PART OF THAT DAY SO THAT THEY CAME INTO the village about midnight.

Ordinarily the village would have been dark, with only the immobile shapes of sentries indistinguishable from the black shadows of the forest, but unaccountably there were hundreds of pin points of lights and an all encompassing blob of light that marked the location of the village now.

An exclamation burst from the throat of William Douglas. "The Statists—raiding again!"

He spurred his horse. The tired animal leaped into a long stride that carried its body closer to the Earth in a hurtling shadow through the trees. Almost before Ketan realized it, William Douglas was out of sight around a bend, then he dug his heels inexpertly into the sides of his own horse.

He clung to the animal's back as it picked up speed and rocked him crazily with its flight along the trail. Behind him he heard John Edwards shouting at him, but he couldn't hear the words in the wind and the sound of horses' hoofs.

It was only when the second Illegitimate forced him over to one side and sped past that he knew John Edwards wanted him to get out of the way.

Despite his slower pace he could now see William Douglas' silhouette on the trail far ahead and spurred his animal faster.

He was still quite distant when he saw that whatever the burning was, the village itself was not on fire. Distinctly, the

outlines of the crude houses stood out against the firelight.

And now, as he came closer, he heard a sound upon the air. It was a sound produced by human throats, but that was all. It was not a sound that could be produced by human beings. It was a wild, animal sound that chilled him like the smell of dead or the sight of evil. It was a sound made under the direction of torn, demented minds that had lost all claim to humanity.

The villagers were making that sound. Fighting down his revulsion at the screaming fury that poured over him, he drove the horse onward.

He came through the outer edge of the village and rode down a crooked street. Then, before him, he beheld the mob of howling Illegitimates. They were gathered in the central square of the village about a flaming pile, whose light was surging up swiftly.

"What—?" he began. Then he saw William Douglas beside him.

"Come away," the Illegitimate leader said softly. "You shouldn't see this."

"Shouldn't see what? What are they doing?"

But before he could answer, Ketan saw the object of fury that was beginning to be bathed in the rising flames. There was a stake in the center of them and a human being was bound to it.

A choked cry burst from Ketan's throat. "William Douglas! Stop them! Do you see what they are doing?"

"It's a Statist they captured today. A spy someone says. You couldn't stop them. They'd tear you to pieces and burn you, too. I couldn't stop them, they'd kill me, first."

Sickened, Ketan turned once again to look at the pyre. Then he saw the head of the bound figure raise and a cry came from its throat. He stared, petrified, and the world stopped.

It was Elta.

Ketan did not reason his next actions. There was no room for reasoning or thought within his mind. Instinct directed him to seize the coil of rope that hung on William Douglas' saddle beside him. With a wild, animal cry he reined the horse up and slashed at its flanks with the coil of rope.

The rearmost of the mob turned—just in time for the hoofs of the horse to crash into their faces. The horse leaped into the throng, with Ketan lashing savagely at its sides.

The mob parted in terror before his onslaught for an instant. But only for an instant. The inhuman cries he had heard before were turned upon him now and hands reached up to drag him down. He kicked out and felt bone crush beneath his feet.

From side to side he slashed with the coiled rope that was now bloody where it had laid faces bare to the bone.

There was nothing remaining there of Ketan, the Seeker from Kronweld. There was only a savage, fear-demented animal upon the horse's back. Ketan's cries matched and exceeded the Illegitimate's in animalness and his voice was heard above theirs.

Slowly, they began to fall back in sheer awe at the fury riding in their midst.

From his own pack, Ketan reached down to withdraw a short knife. He was nearly to the fire, now. A few more steps and he could cut the bonds from Elta.

As he leaned over to reach in the pouch, the horse sagged under the sudden weight of one of the mob that leaped on his back. With a stone in hand, the man clubbed at Ketan's head. It struck a glancing blow and opened a long channel of blood down the side of his face.

Reason mingled with emotion and Ketan leaned over farther, exposing his head and neck to the blows. Then as the assailant drew back for a final blow, Ketan drew out the knife in a single long arc that ended in the enemy's side. He wrenched the knife viciously out of the wound as the man fell.

There was blood covering his hand and it streamed down his face and neck. He could feel the warmth of it inside his leather shirt. All the conditioning of Kronweld fell away from him then and the redness and the smell of the blood was like a drug in his throat.

He lunged about, looking for any more who dared attack from the rear. Automatically he dodged a heavy stone and watched it drop on the other side, felling a mobster with a blow in the temple.

The horse seemed to share his own blood lust. With sharp screams it pawed the air and lunged upon the attackers. Just in time, Ketan saw a hand bearing a knife towards the horse's exposed belly and the coil of rope swept down to obliterate the face of the man that held it.

He was near enough now to feel the intensity of the flames, to see that Elta was hanging limp with her eyes closed, overcome by the smoke and the heat that billowed about her. Her dress—an idle part of Ketan's mind noted that it was her induction robes—was browned and beginning to burn. With fury that rose with the flames, he lashed unmercifully the horse's flanks. He leaned down and stabbed a man in the throat and crushed another's face with his boot.

Then the horse screamed and surged away from the flames.

Ketan turned the coil again upon its flanks and reined it nearer until its forelegs rose in the air and smashed down into the burning wood, scattering embers into the mob.

He slashed out once and a portion of the bonds parted. He screamed out Elta's name to keep her from falling upon her face into the flames, but she could not hear him.

The horse lunged away again, whimpering in terror and Ketan laid open the flesh of its flanks. He drove it nearer and threw a loop about the post above Elta's head and twisted it about the pommel of the saddle.

The heat of the fire was agonizing. It seared his throat and scorched his lungs. He could smell the hair of his head and upon his arms burning.

While the mob howled in frenzied frustration he hacked at the ropes. The horse screamed and lunged in the flames until it nearly uprooted the post.

Then Elta was free. Her sudden weight as she sagged away from the post almost unseated Ketan and plunged him into the white-hot embers below. It was a superhuman effort that held him in the saddle and allowed him to drag Elta's unconscious form across the horse. He cut away the loop and burst away from the flames.

If the cries of the mob had been savage before, there was no name for the frustrated howl that rose into the night as they saw Ketan bearing the limp body of Elta away from the fire.

Renewed in insanity, they came at him again and surged about the burned and wounded flanks of the horse. Burdened now by the additional weight of the girl, the horse slowed and came to a near halt in the midst of the sea of hate.

Ketan struck out with renewed savagery, but he knew instinctively that his handicap of Elta's unconscious form was too great. It would be only a matter of moments now. They were surging forward with clubs and beat upon his legs and body and struck at the horse. His entire attention was spent diverting blows away from the still form of Elta.

He was glad with a part of his mind that this had happened before he made the terrible mistake of turning the Seeking of Kronweld over to these savages. It would be a thousand times better in the hands of the Statists than here. Perhaps the Statists were not what the Illegitimates had pretended at all. True, there was the series of incidents in Kronweld to indicate the Statists were enemies. In any event, when Kronweld did come, they would crush both Statists and Illegitimates alike.

He did not notice the other nucleus of battle and confusion

until it was almost upon him. He heard the rising thunder of a bellowing voice in his ear, and the wave of mob cry slowly ebbed. He turned to see William Douglas and John Edwards battling towards his side.

The great, rolling voice of William Douglas was surging out above the cries about him, drowning them, subduing them, all but the knot of attackers surrounding him.

William Douglas reined the horse up and brought its forelegs crashing down upon the backs of the outermost ring. His hand swung a great club about his head bringing it down in lightning strokes that crushed skulls.

"Stop! Listen to me!" His voice bellowed. Now the thudding of his club against heads could be heard above the sound of the mob. They fell back, dazed and uncomprehending, drained of the emotion that had ignited them and wearied of trying to match the berserk fury in their midst.

The three on horseback seemed reluctant to cease their clubbing and slashing but any more would have been like beating a dead body.

William Douglas rose in his saddle. "These two have come back. Back from beyond the Selector. Do you know what that means?"

The terrified silence of the now frightened villagers was as if a sudden vacuum had appeared to cancel all sound. Then William Douglas went on in a lower voice that still carried to the outermost fringe of the gathering.

As if he sensed the thoughts that were in Ketan's mind, he said, "For three generations we have waited and hoped for the return of those who have gone through, hoping for the heritage of liberation that we believed they might bring us. Tonight you have forfeited all right to that heritage. You deserve to grub and slave for ten times three generations for this night.

"Go to your homes!"

Like a whispering, retreating wave, they dispersed so swiftly that it was almost impossible to see where they had gone. Ketan raised Elta in his arms and followed as William Douglas led the way through the deserted streets—deserted except for the two score dead that lay sprawled upon them.

The silence was like the calm in the eye of a hurricane, quiet, portentous, hot and breathless. Ketan's hate still burned. He knew that it would never die. No means of extermination would be too unmerciful for these barbarians.

William Douglas did not speak until they came to the end of the straight, narrow street to the house where he had stayed.

"We will stay here," he said. "Elta will be cared for. I will get Carmen to come."

Ketan said nothing. Though the two Illegitimates had fought for him and saved his life he could not forget that they were Illegitimates and that William Douglas had only wanted to keep him from seeing the burning, until he found out who it was.

William Douglas was no less a savage than the rest of them.

There were no signs of other Illegitimates about. Ketan took Elta into the house and laid her on the crude bed. She stirred as he moved her. William Douglas bent over and examined her closely. He saw her breathing was good.

"Overcome by smoke, but she'll be all right. Open those windows and see that she gets plenty of air. The burns on her legs will be somewhat painful for a time, but they aren't serious. I'll treat them and have food brought to us."

John Edwards merely stood against the far wall, staring out the window. Ketan saw his arm was bloody and hanging limp. What thoughts were in the Illegitimate's mind, Ketan could not know.

William Douglas returned in a moment with materials to treat Elta's burns. He left the injuries unbandaged and turned to Ketan.

"Looks as if you need something yourself."

Ketan realized dully the long slash on his face was sending out waves of pain, but he had forgotten it. His legs and body were bruised and cut by the blows of clubs and rocks. Silently, he submitted to William Douglas' examination and care.

He watched with a distant, objective curiosity as the marks on his body were washed free of blood, and compounds of herbs were applied and bandaged to the cuts and bruises.

It was a strange and curious procedure. If such wounds had been inflicted in Kronweld no one would have done anything to them. He would have washed them, and if they swelled and flowed with the yellow compound as they usually did he would have taken the self death to alleviate the pain, or, if he had refused that, he would have been taken to the Place of Dying and abandoned.

There was no question of mercy or pity in such treatment. It was the only possibility. The taboos surrounding the investigation of life processes had made Seeking into the possibility of repair of sickness and injury impossible.

Ketan wondered how many thousands of lives would have been saved through the simple remedies of William Douglas

if the Temple of Birth had never been allowed to perpetrate its blinding restrictions upon Kronweld.

When he was through with Ketan, William Douglas set John Edwards' arm and attended to his own needs.

Carmen appeared with food that had been prepared in another part of the house. As if possessed of some guilty knowledge, she glanced abashed at Ketan and did not speak. They ate in silence.

At the end of the meal William Douglas rose awkwardly and looked at Elta. She was sleeping from the effects of the herb drug he had given her.

John Edwards had gone to his own house, but William Douglas sat down near Ketan and began speaking in a low voice.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but I can guess," he said. "I'm not going to try to explain or persuade. Perhaps I just want to hear myself talk to keep from thinking too much. Any time you want me to stop, just say so.

"What you saw tonight must have been like a knife through you. I know, because I have lived among the Statists for so many years. Their blood lust is more refined.

"Ages ago, men used to breed animals. One called the dog, for example, was originally a wild animal with no particular characteristics except living and fighting and hunting for food. But man took individual dogs of slightly variant characteristics and bred them. After hundreds of years, there were scores of different kinds of dogs as different from each other as if they were different animals.

"That's how I think of man, himself, a huge collective animal. Every trait of gentleness, beauty, brutality and savagery is there. Ages ago we existed and survived in this welter of contrasts. All individuals realized the existence of them.

"Then Richard Simons' Selector began breeding this great animal for distinctive characteristics. The scientific and the artistic and the poetic were selected out and segregated in Kronweld. Savagery and tyranny were left behind. But there was still something good remaining, and that, too, separated itself by its own force.

"That was the independence, the fighting love of unhampered rights to live without being owned body and mind by a tyrannical so-called superior class.

"These were the Illegitimates.

"You've seen them tonight. You've seen their hate and their blood lust. It's not them, but it's a part of them. They'll still give every particle of energy to the overthrow of the Statists

and the establishment of a just and scientific way of life. But they'll demand their freedom. They prefer death to anything less, and they're savage and cruel to any who challenge their freedom. They need your science—perhaps you could use some of their vigor and independence."

Ketan did not answer. His eyes stared unseeingly before him. After a long time, William Douglas went on.

"It happened about the same way once before. The greatest pioneers and freedom-loving people that ever lived upon this continent became for a time the most brutal and savage. They were among those who first founded a civilization here, but they became imbued with a rigidity and intolerance that led them to burn and drown and torture members out of their own midst merely upon accusations arising out of whims and selfishness and fear. They were called the Puritans. You will read about them in the histories in the pinnacle."

In the room next to Elta's, Ketan lay awake on the pile of skins thrown in a corner long after William Douglas had gone to sleep. He heard Elta moaning faintly and tossing about in her drugged sleep. Carmen was sleeping in the room with her.

His thoughts were upon the scenes of that night and upon the words of William Douglas. And now that Elta was here, and miraculously safe, he knew there was no great urgency to return to Kronweld as there was before. He could give the full powers of his attention to the commission of Richard Simons.

He wondered if he had not by accident stumbled upon the reason for Igon's failure. Perhaps Igon had discovered just in time the brutality and ignorant savagery of this world and judged it not worth returning to.

Surely that must be it.

Then Ketan recalled his own actions. He recalled the blind emotion that had poured through him in that first instant when he saw Elta, and guided him through to her. He had not believed a brain, his or any other, capable of such feeling as he had experienced that night.

Slowly, he realized what William Douglas had implied, but not stated: That within each man as well as in the race, there were all the contrasts of beauty and hate and love and savagery. He thought of the Statist hunters who flew out of the sky and burned the forest villages and killed the Illegitimates like animals for mere sport of it.

He asked himself: Was the action of the Illegitimates logical in the face of that?

The only answer he could find within him was yes.

With their ignorance, their inherited crudities of life, the hopelessness of their position, there was no other possible reaction except the most brutal retaliation of which they were capable. They were like those others of whom William Douglas had spoken, who first founded the nation that had become greatest on this land, except that the Illegitimates were in a more hopeless position.

They would have to be taught. That would be the job of the men of Kronweld, to fuse into themselves the heritage of this world of Earth, and then amalgamate with the Illegitimates to form the race of which Richard Simons and his scientists had dreamed.

His sleep was short and soon sunlight burst in upon him. He opened his eyes a moment, trying to recall the terror of the nightmare he had dreamed. Then he sat up with the sharp realization that it was no dream. Elta was here. He had fought off an entire village of Illegitimates to get to her.

There was a faint, welcome sound from the next room. It was his name upon her lips. He dressed quickly and went in as Carmen motioned from the doorway. She smiled and looked at him without condemnation.

Elta was lying where the sunlight fell upon her hair. She was smiling through the pain of the burns.

"I came, didn't I?" she said.

"Elta!"

He fell to his knees beside the bed and buried his face against her. She felt his body tremble with a great, subdued sob.

"Elta." He raised his head and repeated her name softly. "I had thought that I should never see you again. Tell me what happened; how you came here."

She looked at him hesitantly. "I wonder . . . how much you know. Have you learned . . . everything?"

"Almost everything," he said. "Except about you—"

"I am a Statist," she said simply. The earth seemed to sink away beneath him and a cold breath swept over him.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Listen to me, Ketan, and believe me. For ten *tara* I have been in Kronweld. With Leader Hoult and Teacher Daran I passed knowledge and discoveries of Kronweld back to Earth and the Statists for their own uses. I saw no harm in it. I didn't realize that there were others on Earth besides the Statists who were worthy of consideration. The great masses of people

—I looked upon them as do all Statists. They are considered breeding cattle for the brains that go to Kronweld to develop more luxuries and riches for the Statists.

"But then a terrible plan was conceived by the Statists. They grew to believe that they were as capable as the Seekers of Kronweld and they feared that Kronweld would soon discover the Gateway and invade Earth, wiping out their rule and their luxury. They decided to wipe out Kronweld. Only one thing more they wanted, and that was the details of the machines you use to employ atomic energies. When they are certain of their mastery of these principles, they plan to turn those forces upon Kronweld and destroy it.

When I learned of this, I rebelled. I refused to go further. Neither Hoult nor Daran could understand what was being done on atomic principles. I was the only one of them able to understand, and they forced me to give it to them on threat of killing you because they knew I . . . that we were to make our companionship, to be married, as they say on Earth."

"You bought my life with that! Why didn't you tell me? I could have protected myself."

"No. Not from Hoult. You saw how easily he had his way with you when you appeared before the Council. It was all a farce, your appearance there. Hoult knew exactly what would happen. You could never have protected yourself from him."

"What of Matra? Who was she? When I first met her she wanted to kill you. In the Temple she told me she understood what you were doing, and that I should trust you."

"Matra was a Statist," said Elta. "She came to the Temple more years ago than anyone can remember. She was the main channel of distribution through which information came from Kronweld to the Statists. That's what we thought.

"Now I know that during all that time she was actually working against Statists, withholding information, distorting it so that Statist engineers couldn't make sense out of it. In a thousand ways she retarded the flow.

"She knew me and Hoult and Daran because we had to work with her. When she learned of the plan to destroy Kronweld, she came to you to get you to kill us. But her time was too short to tell you everything you needed to know.

"If Leader Hoult had not interrupted you that night, you . . . you might have come up behind me while I was waiting for you and killed me."

"Elta!"

"I told Matra that I was going through the Gateway to destroy it and the Selector, sealing off the worlds forever. I

convinced her that I was sincere and she gave me the ring which was supposed to protect me somehow. I don't know how, because I never got to use it."

"Destroy the Gateway! But you would not have been able to come back!"

"It would have been worth the cost. I was willing to give you up for that. I knew you could never live among the Statists. There was nothing that would keep them from their intention to destroy. I had the choice of my own happiness with you, or seeing the destruction of Kronweld. To have gone into Dark Land as we had thought to do once was a wild and wonderful scheme, but we could not have lived there. The Statists will destroy it all when they come.

"I have failed in all I hoped to do. Now . . . I don't know."

"What happened in the Temple after I left?"

"Matra was in communication with a secret band somewhere—I don't know where—who were struggling to save Kronweld, she said. When she learned what I intended she gave her approval because she said it seemed like the only way. But she gave me the ring, which she said would protect me and take me to Igon when I passed through the Gateway. Igon—can you believe it!"

"Igon!" Ketan lifted his head and looked out, seeing for a moment in vision that slim pinnacle in the desert. "So Igon still lives," he said slowly. "Was she sure of that?"

"She seemed very sure, though it seems incredible."

"But Anetel took the ring."

"Yes. She didn't know what it was for, but she knew it was some means of protection."

"Why did you try to kill her?"

"The Statists only lately learned that Matra had turned traitor to them. They directed Anetel, my sister, to go there and take charge of the Temple after killing Matra. I found out about this too late to save Matra."

"Anetel—your sister?" Ketan exclaimed.

"Yes. We are twins. But I would have killed her to save Matra, and prevent the information on atomic applications from reaching the Statists. I had already delivered them to her and it was partly to get them back that I tried to kill her. I thought she might send them through and the Statists would attack before I could destroy the Gateway. But she sent the information through and after you had gone she sent me through, expecting that I would be seized on the other side and killed for my desertion of the Statist principles. Incidentally, the wild story she told you about what was on the other

side of the Edge was for the benefit of the other Ladies. One of them told me about it."

"How did you manage to escape?"

"It's still a mystery to me. I was seized as soon as I went through by someone I didn't know. Two men. They told me to keep still and I would be allowed to escape. They took me through the city to the outside where I was given a ship and certain flying instructions. At the spot where they directed me to go there was nothing but forest. I landed in a small clearing and then these savages seized me and tried to burn me at the stake. That's all."

Ketan frowned. "Who were the men who freed you and gave you the plane? Didn't they say anything to you?"

"Nothing. Apparently they knew somehow that you were here and wanted me to go to you. That was the purpose of the rings, I think—to bring us here. But you came anyway, and I was guided here. I don't understand it."

"Those men were probably part of Matra's—and Igon's secret organization. Would you know them if you saw them again?"

"I suppose so. Tell me now what has happened to you."

"I have found the pinnacle," said Ketan.

Elta's face paled and she sank slowly back upon the hard pillow of animal skins.

"So you found it," she said. Her voice was so faint that he barely heard her. "What did you find?"

Ketan looked at her in mystification. "Why are you so afraid of what is in the pinnacle? What do you know of it?"

"There is a legend among the Statists—ages old—that there is such a pinnacle and it contains the secrets of how Kronweld came to be. The legend says that someday a man from Kronweld will find the pinnacle and lead his people back to claim Earth and destroy the Statists who have sent them there."

"What is terrible about that?"

"Is the legend true?"

"Yes."

"And you are that man?"

"Yes . . . I don't know!" Ketan shook his head fiercely. "Igon was there before me—and he failed. There have been others, but where are they? I must not fail. I will bring them back."

"No!"

For a moment their eyes locked, fierce determination bridging the gap between them.

"That must never happen," Elta said at last, softly.

"Why? We have been robbed of the heritage of our natural

world and thrust into a hot, desolate, unnatural place where even birth cannot take place. Why shouldn't we come back to claim our world?"

Elta did not answer his question. She said, "Tell me what happened there. What is inside the pinnacle?"

After a moment, Ketan began slowly, then with gathering force, to tell her of the trek to the rock in the desert, of the amazing library and repository of the science of a dead world, and of the mission of those who came to the pinnacle.

"The Selector was set to operate at intervals of a thousand years to draw back to it a group of those who had power to understand the plans of Richard Simons and his scientists. Igon was the first. Perhaps I am the last. How many between us—I don't know. But Igon failed. Or did he? Whether or no, the mission is mine now. I will carry it out. I am returning to Kronweld and taking exhibits from the pinnacle. They can't deny my story. They will come back with me."

"I didn't know there had been others," Elta said slowly. "I wonder what became of them. What do you think will happen when all of Kronweld comes here?"

"Why, we'll depose the Statists, remove their hold upon this world and take over its leadership as was planned for us. The Illegitimates will be with us. We will teach them our science and they will teach us—"

"—their savagery and primitiveness?"

"Their love of freedom and their strength to wait and endure and build."

"The poor fools . . . the poor, blind fools," Elta said slowly. Her eyes stared upon some faraway point.

"The Illegitimates?"

"No—Richard Simons and his scientists and Igon and you—"

"What are you talking about? Richard Simons and his group saved a world that might have died if it hadn't been for them. They transplanted it where it could grow unmolested by the degeneracy that would have destroyed it. Now it is time for that transplanting to be moved back. It has grown strong."

"No. That's just it. There is no strength in Kronweld. The kind of strength that is needed upon Earth. Can't you see it, Ketan? It would never work out. You of Kronweld must never come back. Oh, please try to see it. You are blinded by the light of this ancient false dream. It can never be anything but a dream."

"I don't understand you. I wanted to tell you this. I thought you would be glad, that you would believe in it and help."

"It would be more cruel to bring your people here than to

leave them and let the Statists destroy them. I've lived in both worlds and I know.

"This world is cruel. Here men fight each other for survival and the Earth and man are always fighting each other. You saw naked blood lust last night. That is nothing strange in this world. It is a common thing. What would you men and women of Kronweld do in such a world?"

"We would teach them a better way of life."

"You are gentle. Your lives are art and music and poetry and days in your laboratories. Not in the thousand *tara* of your history is there a record of a single occurrence of war, which is the commonest episode in the history of Earth. You say you will come and take this world away from the Statists. Don't you know that they can now turn all the force of atomic energies upon you and burn you out of existence before you can make a move?"

"We could use those forces as well as they. We can invent and build far more destructive machines than they can if necessary."

"You don't know how to fight. The sight of blood is nauseating to the strongest men of Kronweld. To deliberately inflict damage on another human being is the most incomprehensible thing in your lives. Do you think you can take such men and make bloody warriors out of them overnight? They're as gentle as children and the grown men of Kronweld could no more form an army with their mental conditioning than they could have the moment they burst out of the Temple of Birth."

"They could be trained—"

"Think of yourself. You told me how it affected you when you first struck William Douglas."

"I overcame it well enough last night. I was *glad* to kill and hurt them."

"You were insane. The sight of what they were doing to me wiped out all your conditioned restraint. It still has a grip on you, and when it lets go you are going to be sicker and more disgusted with yourself than ever before in your life. But even so, an army from Kronweld will have no such incentive. They will shrink and run at the first sight of destruction and blood."

"The only proof I can offer you," said Ketan, "will be the actual accomplishment of the fact."

"Suppose you should succeed in gaining power. What would you do then?"

"We would make of this world the paradise that Richard Simons dreamed of."

"What would you do with the millions whom the Statists have oppressed into submission, and with the thousands of rebellious Illegitimates? Don't answer me! I'll tell you what you'd do. You'd bring on the greatest period of anarchy and chaos that has been known since the dissolution of world governments in Richard Simons' time.

"He asked if you were ready to govern. I'll answer him for you. You of Kronweld know nothing of government. The machine could try for ten thousand years and none of you would ever be ready. Because you have been almost all of one mind and one impulse, you have little need of government. To take care of this small need you built the *Karildex*. No one among you is experienced in leading and forming laws and administering them.

"To bring about the world you propose you would need thousands of men skilled in leading and in forming and administering laws. As it is, you would be children trying to lead old and wise and evil adults. You would surely fail in any such attempt."

"But we shall make the attempt, at least," said Ketan. "What of Igon and Matra and the evidence of the opposition which you found?"

"I don't know. But I do know that it is too late to make any long plans. The Statists are going to act—and quickly! We must act first. We must destroy the Selector and close the Gateway. You and I will have to make our lives here as best we can."

Elta reached out and took his hand in her own. "We can be happy as long as we are together."

"I'm afraid I can't give it up as lightly as that. This is not a little thing of personal beliefs or prejudices. It's the fate of a world we're talking about. It's the fulfilling or failing to fulfill the reason for the existence of Kronweld. If we fail in this, we might as well have remained and died or have been as the Illegitimates."

"Richard Simons' dream was so terribly wrong. His selection and isolation of you produced exactly the opposite effect that he planned. Instead of making you more fit, it made you less fit for leadership on Earth. Had you remained, you might have been strong enough to lead a revolution that long ago would have freed Earth, but not now."

"You will not help me?"

She looked steadily into his eyes. "I will oppose you with all the powers I can command."

21

KETAN LEFT THE HOUSE AND WALKED THROUGH THE VILLAGE. HE saw only a few villagers at a distance and they disappeared at the sight of him.

He walked through the conglomeration of mud and stick dwellings and wandered into the forest. He found a trail that led up and away towards the high peaks beyond the village.

It was like that first day when he had found himself in the forest and forced himself to walk to keep from thinking. As then, he dared not stop to think now. He dared not face the realities that were in his mind. Everything that he knew was right, that he knew he must do, seemed divided off into conflicting, warring segments that had no meaning.

The breeze was light upon his face and the coolness of it chilled him still, for he was not yet accustomed to the cooler air that marked this place from Kronweld.

The treetops fingered the sky above and still gave him a spinning, uncertain feeling when he looked at them long. But their voices were like the voices of gods in his ears. Their music lulled him, and took some of the infinite pain and weariness out of him.

He dared let a sector of his mind dwell on the thought of Elta. And it brought with it a rush of thoughts that mixed in unreasoning turmoil. He could not understand her reaction to the events through which they had passed. Her final threat to oppose him, bewildered and almost crushed him.

She had the advantage in intimate knowledge of both worlds. She knew the detail of life in Danfer. And that knowledge gave her a certain perspective that he wished he had.

But he had other knowledge and other perspectives that were far more valuable. The knowledge gained from the pinnacle storehouse of Richard Simons. If Eltra could see that, perhaps she would believe.

The scientists had been giants of their day. It was not a casual thought, their dream of perfection in the world to come. They had planned carefully. He realized that now more than ever. He understood now how every detail had been arranged to impress him with the tremendous scope of his mission and the rightness of it.

He hadn't paid enough attention to the re-created laboratory of Earth's scientists. But its significance had been growing unnoticed in his mind ever since.

He felt the single impression that they had intended to make by showing him that vast laboratory. It was an impression of obligation.

These men are looking down upon you from the ages. The inheritance of all they have hoped and dreamed is yours. You cannot fail them.

When he opened his mind to the words of that thought it was like the impact of a blow. He sat down upon a boulder beneath the trees and listened to the eternal voices of the gods of the winds. They were the same voices that had spoken in the days when the men whose images moved and spoke within the pinnacle were alive. They were voices intoning the commission of the pinnacle, commanding him not to fail, lest the work and the dreams of all that vast laboratory of men should have been in vain.

He sat there long after conviction had come. There was a deep calm within him, as of a man who has sought peace from roaming the universe and at last found its seclusive corner. There was sureness and contentment within him. He knew where he was going. He knew he was right, for he was not alone. A thousand ages of man looked down, commanding, trusting, believing—

He was walking again, on up the hill. The air was sharper and the wind spoke more fiercely as he rose along the steep trail.

He needed Elta. That was the only uncertainty about the entire future. He needed her with all the fierce compulsion that interlaced the lives of companions and companions-to-be.

If he took her to the pinnacle, let her look down upon the ages of Earth's scientists, let the essence of their dreams and visions flow over her as it had him, surely she would be convinced, too.

There was no question of possibility or advisability. It was a command that the men of Kronweld should be brought to their homeland. Surely she would understand that if she went to the pinnacle.

But he knew at the same instant that there was no time for it.

The Statists had the technique for the production of atomic weapons in their possession. Kronweld must be made ready to return before the Statists attacked.

He paused for a moment to look at the sky over the tops of the green spears that were now below him. The great concourse of pointing arms hid all the earth below them, and only far distant hills of red and gold shone above them.

Reluctantly, he started down, trying to memorize all the scene before him. Then something caught his eye, a sound and a speck of motion in the sky.

From below, down beyond the village, a darting plummet soared into the air, flashed silver light for an instant and then was gone. And the soft whine that it put upon the air mingled with the sound of the wind in the trees until he wasn't sure that he had heard anything at all.

Puzzled, he wondered what the darting speck had been, but it was only an idle curiosity. He turned back to wondering what he was going to do with Elta. Could he trust her to the care of the Illegitimates? Would they be sufficiently chastened, or would reaction set in that would demand revenge upon her for his killing among them?

And abruptly he saw that Elta had been right about his feelings concerning the night before. As the thought of the night's horror came to him amid the peace of the forest, a wave of revulsion passed through him, revulsion at his own remembered bestiality, that blunt lust to kill. He fought it out of his mind.

There was turmoil in the village when he came down. He looked about, but no one would meet his glance. They turned away and sought their own doors.

The first person who spoke and rushed towards him was William Douglas.

"Ketan!" he cried. "Where have you been? She's gone!"

"Who's gone? What are you talking about?"

"Elta. She got away in her plane, walked to it in spite of her burned legs. Did she tell you she was going?"

Ketan shook his head. A frightening, hollow feeling rose inside him.

"I've got to get to her," he said. "I've got to catch her somehow before she gets to Danfer. She's going to destroy the Gateway so Kronweld can never come through."

William Douglas paled. "She can't do that! It would mean

—failure. We'd never grow out of this—" His eyes swept the squalor of the village.

"But how can we stop her? There's no way to beat her to Danfer."

"If it's true that she is sought by the Statists, she will have to move in hiding from them. That might mean several days before she could carry out her objective."

"What good would that do? You once told me it would take a month to reach Danfer on horseback."

William Douglas' face was white with desperation. "I'm not thinking of horseback," he said. "Remember that pile of wreckage I showed you once?"

Ketan nodded. "What of it?"

"It's machinery. The kind of machinery the Statists build their flyers out of. There is fuel with it. None of us could possibly understand it—but could you?"

Ketan saw what the Illegitimate meant. Wrecked ships of the Statists. Perhaps there were enough parts from which he could assemble a whole machine. It was fantastic, but not an impossibility. He was very sure the Statists were not capable of building a machine, even with the use of Kronweld's principles, that he could not analyze and understand within a short time.

"Let's go to it," he said in a voice filled with subdued tension.

William Douglas led him to the building where the hopelessly inept Illegitimates worked trying to rediscover and retain some of the technical heritage that had been lost to them. They had failed. For three generations they had failed, because it was not in them to understand more than the simplest of mechanisms. But they plodded their barren pathway relentlessly.

Their clumsiness was incredible to Ketan, but he tried to understand their handicaps and admire what they had done.

They had learned to smelt iron and forge crude tools: hammers, shovels, and other digging tools, but machine tools were utterly beyond them. Even the simplest screw mechanism such as nut and bolt combinations was beyond their capacity to duplicate.

Thus the machines of the Statists which sometimes crashed were like pieces of wizardry to the Illegitimates who examined them after killing the occupants.

They arrived at the pile. There were bent and twisted frames, metal sheeting, complex pieces of driving machinery, all tumbled hopelessly in a pile.

Ketan's heart sank. There was nothing here. Nothing that would ever move by self-propulsion again. There were not enough whole parts to enable him to discover just how the Statists had made the machines travel through the air.

"It's no good," he said to William Douglas. "There's nothing here that we could possibly use." He turned away. "Horseback is the only way."

"She'll be weeks ahead of us, and the Statists will already be carrying out their attack if she fails. There must be a way out!"

They left the piled wreckage and went back to the main road between the huts. The sun was high in the shining sky and the villagers were timidly beginning to come and stare at Ketan. He looked upon them in sudden pity for their ignorance, for the terror and the futility of their lives.

Then he heard himself saying to William Douglas as if words were being put into his mind, "There is a way. Think! Where are there such machines as we need? Far better perhaps than the Statists have."

William Douglas stared at him a moment, then comprehension came. "The pinnacle!"

The trail had lengthened by a thousand times since they first had traversed it. Retracing the pathway beneath the green arch of the forest was a venture into eternity. Yet they came out onto the hillside overlooking the bleak desert at the end of the first day as they had the first time.

There were only the two of them with their mounts and their pack horses. They slept only a short time and started again in the darkness of night to cross the still-warm desert. It was only midday when they had reached the gap that led to the Valley of the Winds.

"We were foolish to hurry so much," William Douglas observed. "We can't start through there until morning anyway. Now we have to wait a whole half day."

"Why?"

"You mean—?" William Douglas looked to the far end where the blank gray curtain of drifting sands hung like a veil over the end of the canyon. He turned back to Ketan. "I'm willing if you are."

They ate a short meal and then turned the horses towards the curtain of the winds. They made sure that the pack animals were securely tied. Then they wrapped their own faces in moistened cloths and plunged into it.

It seemed to Ketan like something he had done once be-

fore, a thousand years ago, so long did it seem since they had been there. But as they advanced, time melted for him once more and ceased to exist. It was as if all the visions and their journey there and back previously and now this trip were locked in a single eternity of drifting, stinging needles of sand. He had always been doing this. He would do it forever more.

Like some sudden miracle, the blank towering wall of the pinnacle loomed before them at last. But the sun was nearly gone. Its feeble light that trickled through the sand cloud cast no shadow. It left only an eerie grayness that hung like a shroud over the Earth.

"Hurry," said Ketan. "Let's get the opening uncovered again before dark."

The digging went more swiftly this time because they knew their objective. By the time the dimmest of the fading beams of daylight were gone, they had the recess open again and the faint golden glow of the tiny image suffused into the night.

"Careful," warned William Douglas.

Ketan held himself ready, but the sudden sinking of the sand beneath him was still a shock as he lifted the statue from its base. The stone plug withdrew and tumbled him into the rough rock antechamber.

Richard Simons and his daughter were standing there as if they had not moved since the visitors had left days before.

"You are back," said Dorien, her eyes flashing in recognition. Ketan found it hard to comprehend that she was merely an image of light and shadow.

"We want the most advanced airship that you have," said Ketan. "We want your permission to use it and you will have to give us instructions in its operation."

"Of course," said Richard Simons. "Come with us. You want to go to Igon. The ship is the best way to get there."

William Douglas shook his head in bewilderment. He couldn't comprehend how the figures could make conversational response. And now he was wondering why Richard Simons hadn't suggested they take a ship to Danfer when they were there the first time.

The pair of images led them through the strange garden way where eternal flowers nodded before the breath of never ending breezes, and clouds made their ever new patterns in the sky.

They led up the trail that wound through the woods and into the hills and into the shining marble hall. They wound

up endless stairways and escalators that broke into motion with their approach.

The utter timelessness of the place laid a wrap about Ketan and infiltrated into his being until he felt as eternal as the gods, these ethereal, intangible gods who led them up through the channels of the pinnacle. He renewed his spirit in the eternities about him, and swore a solemn oath to all those who had gone before him that he would honor their dreams with reality.

The four of them came suddenly out into an enormous chamber which Ketan did not recall seeing before.

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Richard Simons said, "You did not stay to see it all. This is something that represents the most advanced technique of the ages before darkness came."

He held a hand extended towards a gleaming, pointed cylinder that stood on its blunt end with the tapering nose extending into the shadowy depths of the roof. Narrow plates like fins extended in pairs along a portion of the length on either side, giving it a stabilized, directive appearance.

Its smooth, featureless exterior meant nothing to Ketan. "Will it take me to Danfer?" he asked.

The image of Richard Simons smiled. "It could take you to the moon—if you wanted to go there. A little rebuilding of the interior to accommodate supplies would be required. It will take you anywhere on Earth as it stands. It is fueled and loaded with adequate supplies. Come, let's go in."

The sight was awe-inspiring to William Douglas. Though he had lived with the Statists, seen the machines they built and flew, he had never imagined a thing of shining beauty like this. It was a perfectly created body of steel and copper and aluminum, awaiting only a spark to bring it alive. He touched his hand to the side as they approached it.

Richard Simons opened a small door in the base as they came up to the ship. It led immediately to a stairway. They climbed endlessly to the height of a narrow tube that occasionally had tempting passageways branching off to unknown secrets of the ship, but the two guides continued upward.

At last, they opened upon a small room that Ketan knew must be located in the nose. It was a transparent walled room. Located in the exact center were twin chairs and a panel of meaningless dials fixed to each other and mounted on gimbals. A short stepway led up to the seats.

"These are the controls," said Richard Simons. "I will show

you how to operate them. You might be interested in knowing that in the final battles of the last war this ship was known as a fighter. It required a crew of twenty men to man it, and fight it; modified it makes an excellent two-man transport."

Ketan and William Douglas mounted the steps and sat in the seats that did not sway despite the seemingly fragile mounting. Richard Simons stood on the ladder. His finger touched a button on the panel. Nothing appeared to happen.

"That circuit is connected to the external power units in the pinnacle," he said. "I just burned away the protective coating that was placed over all parts subject to corrosion when the ship was first deposited here. Now that the coating is gone, sealed lubricants are being automatically fed to all moving parts. In a moment it will be ready."

They waited in silence and after a moment Richard Simons pressed another button and then a second. With the first, a low hum of undetermined origin seemed to pervade the atmosphere. With the second, a portion of the roof over them slid aside and wind-borne sand poured in upon them, pecking at the transparent nose of the ship.

The scientist pointed out to Ketan the simple semiautomatic controls and explained their operation. "You may go any time," he said. "Do not fail."

He turned and went down to Dorien who had waited below. Ketan and William Douglas watched them go down the narrow companionway; then in a moment the faint clap of the door came to them.

Ketan advanced a control and the ship rose slowly through the hole in the flat mesa top of the pinnacle and soared through the night.

A feeling of awe came over him as they rose above the blanket of sand and air that hid the Earth below and glimpsed the stars above. How easy it would be to just keep going, Ketan thought. The ship would simply rise forever if he let it. He wondered why they had never built such a ship in Kronweld.

But he had little time for such wonder. William Douglas beside him was gasping, "Not so fast! We've got to check on our navigating, too."

Only then did Ketan realize that he didn't have the slightest idea of where they were going. At the same time his finger had unconsciously advanced the power control until they were hurtling through the atmosphere at terrifying speed, a flight as aimless as his plunge down that long corridor from Kronweld.

"How can we find it?" asked Ketan. "Can you tell?" The magnitude of the problem of navigation bewildered him. In Kronweld it would be possible to see any point of arrival within reason, but in the vast expanse of Earth's surface—

"I don't know. Let me see what direction we've been headed."

Ketan was baffled when William Douglas indicated the compass and explained its operation. In the narrow confines of Kronwell, no such science as navigation or instruments therefor had ever arisen. But its logic was clear and shortly he had leaped ahead of the Illegitimate's crude explanation.

"Can you give me the heading of Danfer with respect to the pinnacle?"

"Yes. It's forty-seven degrees and a distance of four hundred miles. Check your time and velocity and present heading."

Ketan made the necessary calculations mentally and adjusted the controls to the new heading. Silently, the slim projectile speared the night air.

Ketan stared absently at the stars overhead, his thoughts on Elta. "I wonder how she is," he said. "What about the burns?"

"They could give trouble, but I imagine she knows enough to take care of them. The Statists have developed a fairly good art of medicine."

After a time the Illegitimate checked their flight and leaned forward. "We're almost there. Look for a mass of lights— I wonder if that is it way over there on the horizon."

They turned the ship to investigate.

"That's it!" William Douglas exclaimed. "Those lights in the center. They mark the great dome of the citadel of the Director. Within it is the giant Selector."

"I don't think it would be anything but foolish to attempt to take the ship into the city," said Ketan, "or for you to appear there. Let's land somewhere outside and I'll go in alone. If I'm not back in, say, twenty days it will mean that I have failed. It will mean that you must wait for Igon, if he still lives, or try to contact the group he organized."

"No. I'm going with you."

"Didn't you tell me that every entrant into the city must have his brand registered at once? What would they do to you with your artificial brand, which they know already? I'm protected. Mine is natural. I want you to draw me a map of the city. Give me the names of principal locations and acquaint me so that I may pass examination."

"Perhaps—" William Douglas agreed reluctantly. And in his eyes Ketan read the unspoken thoughts. Thoughts that went back to that dim cave by the sandy-beached mountain stream, where a smoking pot of grease lit the space in which a woman and a child died. Deaths for which the Statists were directly responsible. And this was the city of the Statists.

He knew that William Douglas would be utterly useless with the overpowering emotion of that black night crying out for vengence upon the Statists.

The innate skill in Ketan's slim fingers guided the ship in a hovering, silent arc towards the city. The lights of Danfer were dim, scattered sparks that hung as if suspended in the midst of some vast abyss.

"There is a forested region to the left," said William Douglas. "It is flat, but heavily wooded. I think you will find a safe hiding place there if you can get down into it."

Ketan nodded. "We can try."

He turned the nose of the ship downward towards the indicated sector. Powerful lights were buried in the belly of the ship, but Ketan dared not use them until he was very low. He turned them on for a brief glimpse ahead and jerked the nose sharply upward. His fingers trembled at the sudden sight of towering green spires blocking the pathway through the night.

"That was close," William Douglas said softly. "Better leave the lights on. I don't think there's much danger this far out at this time of night."

Cautiously, Ketan turned the beams ahead again in time to see a tiny clearing. He tipped the nose into the air and let the ship drift forward on its momentum, then he blocked the motion and settled the ship gently on its stern.

The men slipped out of the seats and went through the length of the ship and out into the cool night air. It was cold to Ketan, and he trembled violently with its impact.

"We'll have to wait until morning," he decided. "There's no chance of finding my way out of here tonight."

"Perhaps I should go with you—"

"Someone ought to stay with the ship."

They went back inside and found compartments made up with beds ready as if they were long-expected guests. They fell upon them and slept soundly until the glinting sun's rays poured through narrow ports upon them.

After a breakfast of synthetics, they went out into the air that was slowly warming under the sun's rays.

"There is an ancient, abandoned highway not far from here,"

said William Douglas. "I'll go that far with you and it will lead you on into the city."

Ketan assented and as they walked, William Douglas continued his instructions. "This road will take you in past the airfield. It's about a full day's walk from here to the citadel. Talk to as few people as possible. You will be stopped at the airfield and your brand examined. Say that you have come from the East as your accent will mark you. You will be required to answer no other questions, so don't be afraid of approaching them. Be sure of yourself and they will not be suspicious.

"When you get to the Selector, you may have a long wait. Get close to the front. You will not be barred. As soon as you see an infant appear on the altar surrounded by electrodes, climb the steps and leap into the flames beside it. You will be through."

He paused at the top of a low rise, then pointed to a distant break in the green of the forest. A broken white strip lay across it.

"That's the highway. Hundreds of years ago they say these roads went clear across the continent and thousands of automobiles, as they called them, were driven on the roads. None of the roads are used now."

At the edge of the strip, Ketan paused. He hoisted the pack containing the books from the pinnacle and the food from the ship to his back and grabbed William Douglas' hand. "Twenty days," he said. "Go back if I'm not here by then."

When he looked back to carefully mark the spot for turning off the highway into the forest, the Illegitimate had disappeared.

Ketan began walking swiftly, subconsciously trying to find a rhythmic beat in the irregular music of the wind through the trees. There was magic in these forests of Earth, and he gave himself up wholly to it now. He gave no thought to the tremendous and difficult task ahead of him. He only listened to the wind and walked and dreamed of the past that was his heritage and the future that he would make of it.

The highway was not worthy of the name. No vehicle could have traversed it. Huge chunks of irregular stone material jutted up at crazy angles. He noticed that one side was smooth and wondered if the material had been poured molten as were the formed roads of Kronweld. Trees, small and large, had broken through the material and torn and twisted it aside like slow, careless giants, heedless of the transitory civilization that had formed the once mighty roadway.

The whole Earth was like a Place of Dying. It was not individuals but a nation, a race, a civilization that was dying. Yet before it even ceased its death struggles a new and worthy civilization would be present to replace it, a civilization that was an offshoot of the old, yet purified of all the sickness and foulness that was within the old.

And somehow, it had come to be his fate to have the rebirth rest upon the success of his endeavor. He could not bear to think long upon that. He brought his mind back from it, and became just Ketan, Seeker of Kronweld, bent upon a certain and interesting quest.

When the sun was no more than overhead he glimpsed the outskirts of the city. The forest was at its very edge, almost overrunning it. He had expected, somehow, to find a bright and shining city of great, smooth roads and cast buildings as in Kronweld, because the Statists had access to all of Kronweld's culture.

But through the depths of the trees on either side of him he could see ruins, great piles of tumbled masonry that were overrun with forest growth. The Statists were barely holding out against the power of the encroaching forest.

Beyond the large clearing of the airfield, which he saw ahead of him, he glimpsed the mysterious, half ruined city. The distant, mighty citadel was visible even from here, and it was the one structure that showed the power and strength of an advancing, building culture.

It was obvious that he would have to appear as having come from the direction of the field. A cluster of buildings at the other side indicated where he would have his brand examined and pass into the city.

He retreated into the forest and left the crumbled remains of the highway. He moved under cover of the foilage to the opposite side of the field. He hesitated a moment before breaking out into the open.

At that moment he heard a whine in the sky, familiar through hearing it once before. He glanced up involuntarily. A shining dot was growing with incredible speed. He watched it drive towards the field and arc up in a long, graceful curve that reached an apex and then dropped the ship gently to earth.

Almost at once, a file of passengers began to emerge from the ship and he moved out of hiding to mingle with them as they passed into the building.

He was apprehensive over his garb, but upon examination of the scene before him all apprehension vanished. An incredi-

ble conglomeration of garbs and types of clothing was represented among the travelers.

That meant one thing to him. It meant that transportation and communication were extremely limited even with this mode of travel to allow such diverse fashions to exist side by side.

The tall, silent ship was standing so that it overshadowed the nearby buildings. The buildings could almost have been transplanted from Kronweld, Ketan thought. The nearest was surrounded by the same type of white fluted columns in rows as used in Kronweldian architecture.

He came towards the building as inconspicuously as possible. Keeping just a little apart, he climbed the short flight of steps with the last of the passengers from the ship.

They passed into a room noisy with the bustle of arrival and greeting. Then he saw that the new arrivals were headed for a counter and were baring their arms for inspection. He hung back to see what the procedure was.

A uniformed man strolled across from the opposite wall and spoke to him. "Step over to the identification counter, please."

It was a mere statement, but it carried to Ketan all the implied force of the Statist world that would destroy without mercy anyone they caught who had not properly passed the test of the Selector.

Ketan moved towards the counter at the end of the line of travelers. He looked at the faces of those about him. He saw none like those of the Illegitimates. He saw no determined defiance. He saw no rebellion. Only a docile acceptance of the routine that represented a thousand years of tyranny.

At last the man ahead of him was baring his arm. Ketan saw a flexible tube with a cup-shaped appendage that fastened for an instant over the man's purple scar. The bored operator of the device nodded and the man moved on.

Ketan bared his arm and the operator applied the tube without even glancing at Ketan. He held it a moment, then nodded perfunctorily without expression upon his bland face.

Ketan started to move away and had reached the end of the counter when the voice of the operator came to him. "Just a moment, please."

He turned back. The man was frowning as if for the first time in many months a thought were running around in his brain. "Just a moment, please," he said again, and it was no request.

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KETAN STEPPED BACK, FEARFUL THAT SOMEHOW HE HAD slipped and betrayed himself. He waited for a tense moment while the operator frowned over some papers on a desk. In a moment he came back to Ketan.

"Please step down the hall and go into the third room on your left. They will be expecting you."

Ketan searched the man's face for an instant, but nothing was expressed there. The former blandness had returned. Ketan wondered what would happen if he refused to obey the order. He decided the results would not be worth the risk of finding out.

But who were *they*? The pronoun had an abnormal significance the way the stupid-faced operator spoke it.

Ketan turned abruptly and moved in the indicated direction, counting off the doors. He paused before the third on his left, then pushed it open.

Two men were seated beside a desk. In a glance he took in the superior materials and fashion of their dress that marked them as Statists.

Their faces were not more intelligent than that of the operator he had left. There was a quality that he could not name in the gray, cold eyes of the one and the narrow beady ones of the other. If he had been more familiar with Earth ways and expressions, he would have called it cunningness.

They did not speak as he entered. They surveyed him carefully and calmly, taking in the rough cut of the leather garments, the wind- and sand-roughened skin of his face and hands. They noted with minute examination the deliberately calm eyes he held narrowed beneath his long brow.

He felt that each of them was examining him like some new animal specimen for private reasons of his own. But he took advantage of the moment to return their examining gaze.

The man on the left was short and squat, and his shoulders were so rounded that he had to bend his neck back in order

to look ahead. His little eyes looked up beneath the wrinkles on his brow in a way that reminded Ketan of a vicious little animal readying himself to strike.

The other man exhibited contrasting calm, an almost indifferent expression that lurked at the corners of his mouth in a trace of an amused smile. But his glance was no less intent and keen.

It was he who spoke first. "Are you one of Igon's?" he said.

An electric warning struck at Ketan. "I don't know what that means," he answered.

The fat man frowned more and the tall one broadened his smile. "Perhaps not," the latter said. "Perhaps you have not learned of him yet. Nevertheless, you must know that your registration number indicates that you passed through the Selector as a reject. Yet here you are alive on Earth. Can you explain that to the Statists should they ask you?"

"You are not Statists?" Ketan's eyes widened in what he hoped was an expression of surprise. At that same time a sickening, sinking sensation was within him. What fools he and William Douglas had been not to know that they would have his number registered as a reject. If these two were Statists, his position was more than desperate. If they were of Igon's following—how was he to know?

"Where did they tell you to find Igon's headquarters?" the tall one said. "Let us prove who we are by leading you there."

Ketan shook his head. "I know nothing of what you are talking about."

"Perhaps you can tell us where you left Elta. She would help identify us. You know of her, do you not? And the help she has given Kronweld?"

"I never heard such a name before."

The short, fat man gave a snort of impatience. "This is all nonsense, Javins. All this stupid talk about an organization of Igon's. We all know he was done away with before he had a chance to do anything and that was more than sixty years ago. All of them have said the same thing. Let's get him to the Director and get it over with."

"Very well." The man named Javins sighed in resignation. "I suppose you're right, Bocknor. But it's always worth a try. I still believe that daughter of mine made some contact with them, from the reports we've had from Anetel. I'd give anything to know where she is. Perhaps he can be made to talk."

"Pah! He doesn't know anything! He stumbled through like the rest. We've got more important things to do than this. The last three projector units are ready for test."

Ketan stood motionless as if congealed in a mold. He stared at Javins. Elta the daughter of this sharp-faced, cruel-eyed Statist—!

But part of what they said heartened him. They did not know where Elta was. Did that mean that she had not yet arrived? Or that something had happened to her? At least he wasn't too late to go through the Gateway—if he could escape from the hands of the Statists.

And yet another unlooked-for opportunity was here. The Director! William Douglas had told him unbelievable tales of the creature known as the Director, who ruled the Statists with unyielding cruelty. Might it not be worth some delay to encounter the Director and see what the opposition was truly like?

As he stood immobile, thinking, the two arose and came around the desk. Touching him on the arm, Javins and Bocknor drew him along and out the door.

They went down the hall in the opposite direction from which he had previously come and out a door in the side of the building. For a moment, as he passed under the high roof of the portico, he was touched with a sting of nostalgia, for the surroundings were so much like any public place in Kronweld. He found it hard for a moment to realize that he was eons and infinities from Kronweld, that he had no idea of his present position with respect to it.

"Come along." Bocknor gave him a shove towards a small, carlike object at the base of the steps. A glance showed Ketan it was much more crude than the cars of Kronweld. Instead of atomics it appeared to have an internal combustion engine using distilled fuel. It smoked and hummed as the fat Bocknor took the driver's seat and spun the wheel about.

Seated between the two, Ketan had little freedom of movement, but he craned his neck about as much as possible to get a look at the city.

The great, the fabulous city of the Statists was a thing of ruin and degeneracy.

He found it difficult to comprehend the economy and government that must exist here. The entire picture of Earth's past government and the present rule among the Illegitimates was a confusing mass of indigestible information to his Kronweld-trained mind, but the conditions among the Statists was even more confusing.

The Statists were few, that was certain. But they ruled the vast millions of Earth in a way that Earth had never seen be-

fore. By reason of their stolen science, they formed a malignant, intellectual hierarchy.

The result was the conglomerate city of Danfer. Artisans, planners, technicians were too few to build a great new city or to even maintain the old ruined one. They had only managed to slow the decay and to build the citadel that housed the majority of the Statists. In other parts of the world Ketan imagined the conditions must be even more primitive.

Though they had possession of Kronweld's secrets of metallurgy and machinery, they could only administer their technique by slow hand processes.

That would explain the existence of single great flyers like the one he had seen side by side with the ruin in the forest.

Cars like the one in which he rode were few upon the streets. The street itself wound among rubble piles that lay neglected beside dwellings, some of which were new in their curious copying of Kronweldian architecture and others of which were simple old buildings patched up with a dozen different styles of design and materials.

Trees lined the streets in haphazard and uncared-for patterns.

The car at last entered the central portion of the city and then Ketan saw the structure that loomed all out of proportion to the rest of the city.

He saw the citadel headquarters of the Statists, the house of the great Selector.

A thin, but steady line of parents was flowing through a high arched opening in the side of the building. Most of them carried an infant to be submitted to the test of the machine. Ketan had difficulty in understanding how there could be such a steady stream provided by a city the size of Danfer.

Then he realized there were those who had come by horse and cart and every other possible means from hundreds of distant towns and villages, besides the ones who lived in the adjacent forests and wild lands. William Douglas had said that some traveled for weeks.

Neither of the Statists had spoken to him since they left the airfield. Now they stopped the car and Bocknor rolled out.

"Quick, now," he growled. "The Director expects you. He will not wait in patience long."

As he stepped out and glanced up at the vast expanse of the wall of the citadel, Ketan was reminded of the great Edge of Kronweld, except that the wall was gray instead of black. Its expanse blotted out half the sky and the Earth.

He tried to formulate some plan as they led him inside, but

none shaped itself in his mind. He didn't know the strength or manner of his opposition. He would have to wait.

In the semidarkness of a large marble chamber the air was cool and music came from some faint source. Kronweld again, Ketan thought.

They crossed the chamber and entered a tube car that closed upon them and rose and darted through a channel that carried them alternately horizontally and vertically. Then it became motionless and they stepped out. They crossed the corridor and entered a wide, ornate door opposite.

The room Ketan saw was vast and there were so many items within it that Ketan thought there was no one there but themselves. He had to refocus his eyes, taking each feature and item of the room one at a time. It was literally filled with apparatus and equipment.

Along the high ceiling ran great racks of cabling interspersed with shield-covered masses of no obvious purpose. On his right, Ketan saw an ebony panel that covered the entire wall. Meters and switches and glass-enclosed coils covered its surface. Straight ahead, innumerable banks of tubes glowed and pulsed with blue or yellow light.

It was as he drew his eyes back from this bank of tubes that he saw the other, almost dwarfed object before the mass of equipment.

Its central structure was an elongated glass tube, the size of a man, resting horizontally. Into the tube flowed a mass of cabling, some from the racks above, others from nearby banked mechanisms.

Inside the tube was the motionless figure of a man.

Ketan stared and started forward involuntarily.

"Wait until he speaks," Bocknor snarled at Ketan and jerked his shoulder roughly.

"I am quite ready. Let him come forward. The Director speaks."

The voice that filled the room was surging with quiet, suppressed power. It was the voice of a young sure man who had never known fear.

Slowly, Ketan advanced. He felt a prickle of the short hair on his neck as he came closer and glimpsed more fully the travesty within the tube.

It might have been a man once, Ketan thought. The face was like a piece of wrinkled leather. The mouth was sunken and tightly closed in only a suggestion of an orifice. The top of the head, devoid of hair, was yellow, as if the skin had been partially tanned.

Whether there were eyes or not, Ketan could not tell. Where eyes should have been there were two black, hemispherical cups that rested upon the sockets. They seemed permanently attached to the skin.

"Not an extremely attractive sight," the voice said again.

Ketan realized that those lips had not spoken; they had not spoken for many *tara*. But the voice—it throbbed with life.

Ketan advanced slowly until he jarred abruptly into an invisible wall.

"That is close enough. Protection, you know," the voice said. "I think we can see each other well enough now."

"Who are you?" Ketan finally gasped. "How do—?"

"How do I live? Peculiar, isn't it"—he seemed to be speaking now to the other Statist—"how all these young Seekers from Kronweld ask the same question. You'd think they would be more concerned with their own fate and existence than with mine."

Then, directly to Ketan: "I am always happy to have such solicitous interest, however, because it is your work that makes it possible. By the principles you have worked to uncover, I have been able to replace nearly all of the natural functions of this poor body with mechanisms that more than compensate me for the loss of the original equipment.

"I was blinded many years ago by an accident due to my hastiness in trying to go ahead of knowledge you had furnished us. I was young then and would not be so foolish again. It took the use of my hands and destroyed my legs. But I have managed to exist for a good many years as Director with mechanical substitutes."

Ketan observed that from the cables entering the tube, a network of fine wires went directly to the withered skin of the man's arms and legs and into his throat. It was as if they were fine hairs growing directly upon his flesh.

"You are looking closely?" the Director said. "Yes, those wires go directly to the nerves that are left. Motor impulses are multiplied a hundred thousand million times in those tubes behind me. They, in turn, operate machines that stretch around the world. My voice, too, is merely a mechanical thing controlled by nerve impulses. My own vocal cords atrophied long ago. Food, you see coursing through some of the tubes leading from the machines outside. I am nourished quite well."

Ketan had not noticed the blood-red tubes that he now saw running from the back of the transparent container to nearby pumps and mixtures. He felt a return of that old sense of

revulsion as he realized the full amount of altering that this human mechanism had undergone. But at the same time he was awed and appalled at the amount of alteration that was possible. Not one in a thousand of those who went to the Place of Dying in Kronweld need die, he thought, if such were the dormant possibilities of their Seeking.

"Well, Bocknor, what shall we do with this one?" The Director's voice was rich with amusement.

"Kill him, of course. He's dangerous."

"He claims no knowledge of Igon or of Elta or any of the organization?"

"No—of course he's lying."

"I wonder. I wish there were some way to make them confess. We've tried before and never found one who would admit seeing Igon. There must be some mental compulsion impressed upon them in the pinnacle. How I'd love to lock with that great man of yours just once before I die—provided he's still alive."

"Igon is dead," Ketan said.

The voice chuckled. "I'm afraid your persuasion is too weak. Igon and his organization—what is left of it—still exist, perhaps in one of the other planes. We are sure of that, but we don't worry about it much. You see, we have a plan. Would you care to tell him about it, Bocknor? You are in charge of the arrangements."

"No—let's get on. We're wasting time with this," Bocknor snarled unexpectedly.

"Tell him!"

There was a moment's silence in which Ketan could hardly refrain from exclaiming aloud. Here it was—the weakness he had hoped to find. There was schism within the Statist headquarters.

By their very restraint in the face of white-hot emotions, Bocknor and the Director gave away the situation. Ketan knew the fat, stooped man was contending with every fraction of power he could command to wrest control from the half man, half machine that guided the Statists.

"We have atomic power projectors almost finished which will be projected through the Gateway and turn Kronweld into a molten vat," said Bocknor.

"Pleasant fellow, isn't he?" said the Director. "And now can you guess what we are going to do with you? We are going to send you back and watch you try to convince your fellows that you should prepare to fight back. Oh, yes, we . . . that is I . . . can see quite well what transpires in Kronweld.

I can see everywhere with my eyes of metal and glass and electrons. They are much better than the old ones.

"So I am going to enjoy immensely the spectacle of you trying to convince them of the existence of Earth. You will have to be careful, you know, because they will probably be quite upset over your disregard for the Temple of Birth. I suggest you work through the Unregistereds. That's quite an organization you have. But be sure to provide me good entertainment until Bocknor gets his projectors ready. I'll enjoy your struggles immensely."

"Don't you think I might succeed?" asked Ketan.

"No. I have not studied Kronweld all these years for nothing. Success is absolutely impossible for you, yet you will go on struggling until the day that Bocknor turns on his beam. That will be the amusing part of it."

"Then why are you so afraid of Kronweld. Why can't you let it live?"

"The pinnacle, you fool, and Igon's group. They'll succeed eventually or would if we didn't cut them off, but you have absolutely no chance of success in the time that is left. If you were another Igon, I might not take a chance, but there is no danger to us in you.

"You came close to some important discoveries, however, I must give you credit. You guessed correctly that the Temple of Birth formed the weakness of your culture in the many superstitions it created. The mysterious appearance of life made a taboo of all investigation into life processes and led to the existence of a whole group of so-called forbidden Mysteries, as you so quaintly called them. Your resulting science had no biology, no bacteriology, no physiology. All chemistry, physics and electronics. It must have been a strange world to live in, but I suppose few of you realize the peculiarity."

"How do you know of these sciences, then?"

"Our history tells us that they once flourished on Earth and we have managed some development of our own. Since they are mostly observational sciences, they require little creative intellect, an admittedly scarce item among us."

"I was right then, and if those superstitions were removed, Kronweld would be far superior to any force you could bring together upon Earth."

"Quite right. And because the trend of your culture is slowly moving in this direction, we have decided that it must be destroyed before it becomes a power that might overthrow us. Do you see?"

Ketan didn't see. His mind failed to grasp an insight into

the thought processes of the Director. So alien was the concept of war and conquest to any mind conditioned in Kronweld, that Ketan could not begin to grasp the outline of the desires that motivated such action.

He would have to act blindly as if the Director and the Statists were nothing more than a great, insensitive machine created for the destruction of Kronweld. But there was one clue to the impulses of the Director. It seemed obvious that his injuries had made him feel so much less than other men that he had spent a lifetime endeavoring to be more than any other man and to wield power over all men.

That was the real secret behind his reason for wanting to destroy Kronweld. The Seekers of Kronweld were rivals to his power. Not that there was much danger of them discovering the Gateway and challenging the Statists without the influence of the pinnacle, but their mere existence in an alien plane was a challenge to his powers. The Director's motive was to destroy any superior power anywhere in the universe whether it encroached upon his domain or not.

Ketan felt a chill in the face of such an insatiable lust for power.

"What have you done with the others you captured of those who came through?"

"We haven't kept count of the number," said the Director. "We killed some of them outright. I take a look at them once in a while. They are quite ingenious. One of them is living in a world where space itself is tangible. Quite a curious existence he's leading there.

"But I'm becoming tired now. What's left of this body tires easily. Bocknor and Javins will take care of you now. Have a pleasant journey. Good-by."

As if at a signal, Ketan's arms were grasped roughly by the two Statists and he was spun about and out of the room.

Silently, they went out and down a long, dim corridor where even their footsteps were soundless and muffled. Ketan glanced at his guards.

"I should think you would grow tired of being ruled by that—machine."

Bocknor confirmed Ketan's suspicions about the relationship between himself and the Director. "It won't be for long," he said. "Spend your sympathy on yourself."

His hand suddenly released Ketan's arm and Ketan looked back and up, quickly.

Bocknor's arm was drawn back, with a sharp, pointed knife gleaming in his hand. Ketan dropped to the floor, doubling

over, and seized the fat man's legs near the ankle. He jerked hard and twisted at the same time. He felt the knife part the fiber of his leather shirt.

Javins let out a savage bellow of rage and kicked the knife from Bocknor's hand, at the same time seizing Ketan's arm in a vicious twist as Ketan was about to spring away.

"You fool . . . you fool!" Javins raged. "Why did you try that?"

"He's too dangerous. I want him dead."

"You'll do as the Director says—as long as he's alive."

"He would never know. We'd tell him the prisoner started a fight and we had to kill him."

"Won't you ever learn? Don't you think the Director is looking at us and hearing what we say right now?"

In sudden, overwhelming fear, Bocknor whirled and looked nervously about.

"You can't see him," Javins reminded needlessly, "but he can see *you*. Come on."

They started again. Ketan felt a curious mixture of elation and despair. Elation because it was going to be so easy to return to Kronweld after all. Despair because of the tremendously greater opposition facing him than he had realized before.

The Director had prophesied failure of any attempt to appeal to the people of Kronweld. That was partly in agreement with the argument Elta had used. Ketan had thought it would be so simple once he returned with the story of Earth and Kronweld's heritage. Now he was beginning to be uncertain of himself. The Statists had taken the books and evidences he had hoped to take back. All he would have would be himself and his incredible story. Could he make them believe it?

They would have to believe it. He would make them, somehow.

The corridor ended abruptly. There was a sudden tenseness visible in both the Statists as they approached it, as if they were half fearful of the powers they were about to face.

They paused for a moment at the blank door that barred their progress. Then, with a quick motion, Bocknor flung open the door and they shoved Ketan through. He heard the door lock behind him.

As if staring at a sudden nightmare brought to life, he looked out upon the scene before him. A concourse of staring faces looked up. It was like the brief vision he had from the niche in the Temple of Birth. They were staring, pleading,

with desperate anxiety on their faces. They made no sound, but the hundreds of pairs of eyes were upon him.

He was standing a little above them at the top of a flight of terrace-like steps that ended at the shelflike altar upon which he stood. Below, in the depths under those terraces he could feel the hum and vibration of the power that surged through the machine. He realized that all this vast protuberance of altar and steps and giant, shining electrodes about him was the Selector itself.

The dome of the building threw out a pale light that fell upon the dispirited crowd. Apparently the people had been prepared for something, for there was pity, too, upon their faces.

All this he caught in a glance that took no more than a fraction of a second before he heard the sound of confusion far to the rear. At the same instant he saw the motion of a fearful backward glance from someone in the front, near the Selector.

Then the figure turned and he stifled a cry.

Elta was there. Her anxious eyes glanced from the altar to the rear of the building and back to Ketan.

She was wearing a long, shrouding cloak that almost hid her from head to foot. One hand was held inside the folds of the cloak and he knew almost before she drew it out what she held in there.

A sudden blast of sound filled the hall and became a voice that thundered, "The judgment of the Director—oblivion!"

At that moment the electrodes on either side began to glow and the scene grew vaporous as if beneath a thickening fog. It swirled crazily, and Ketan realized he had fallen to his knees.

The fog began to glow in spots that gyrated in senseless patterns of light, growing faster and faster in pace until they blurred into streaks. He felt as if a mounting tension within space itself were about to tear him apart.

Then dimly, through the mist and blinding lights, he saw the figure of Elta. The pursuers, who had created the disturbance at the rear, were almost up to her now. She drew her hand out of the cloak and Ketan recognized the form of a Dark Land weapon.

From its nose there crashed a beam of light, and below him there appeared a bright spot of fire that raked across the terraces of the Selector. Sudden thunder of exploding equipment beneath shook the hall. The altar tipped crazily and Ketan cried out Elta's name.

23

THERE WAS SOFT MUSIC IN THE NIGHT AND PERFUME wafted upon the air. In the black sky above, purple shadows and lights leaped and fluttered, and trembling, elusive pinpoints of starlight showed momentarily.

Ketan lay upon his back, eyes staring up at that familiar but alien sky. Beneath him was a carpet of soft grass, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the gleaming white curve of a huge hemispherical surface that arced up until a curtain of blackness cut it off.

The air was warm and a sharp, familiar pungency came to his nostrils. The winds were blowing in from Fire Land tonight, he thought.

He sat up, sick with the memory of that last instant that he remembered, the vision of Elta spraying the Selector with a flaming knife that cut into the heart of the eternal machine.

He remembered that last moment of falling terror when he plunged down from the shattered altar towards the pool of flaming metal that marked the path of her beam.

But the Selector had acted an instant before its destruction, he knew. It had opened the Gateway and flung him through, beyond the meaningless eras, and beyond the gaps of space that separated the worlds.

And now that Gateway was closed.

Forever.

Elta had succeeded in her insane scheme of cutting off the worlds from each other, and he had failed in the mighty commission of the pinnacle to bring the worlds together.

There was no purpose in his being in Kronweld now. He may as well have remained in Danfer and perished in the ruins of the Selector.

He tried to force himself not to think of Elta's fate. He knew what it would surely be. He had seen those minions of the Director nearly upon her as she pressed the trigger

that flamed the Selector. Even at this moment, they would be bearing her back to the Director and that withered travesty of a human being would pronounce a sentence worse than death upon her. There would be no satisfaction to the Director that Kronweld was cut off and would die of its own sterility. To demonstrate his power, he had to destroy it with his own hand.

The weaving curtains of light flared in the sky for an instant and Ketan caught a half lit picture of all the white city with its columns and towers of shining marble. It was like a scene upon Earth in the light of a red and purple moon.

He wondered if Anetel knew. He looked towards the glistening Temple of Birth from whence the soft music came. He wondered why he had not come into the chamber of birth. Probably it was due to the distortion of the Gateway caused by Elta's burning of the Selector.

Probably no indication had come to the Ladies of the Temple of the change that had taken place. They would continue to wait inside the bleak Chamber of Birth, but no more would rejected infants of Earth come to them.

They had been alarmed by the decreasing number that had appeared during the last few *tara*. How great would be their panic as the days lengthened into *tara* now and none at all appeared. Ketan wondered who the last man would be, the last man to live and die in this world of the dead.

But as he lay on the grass with these morbid thoughts filling his mind he knew somehow that they were all wrong. Kronweld could not die so easily. Perhaps some way could be found to overcome the sterility that seized them all. If they could be persuaded to go into Dark Land, there was a chance that like the Bors—

There was a better thought: Why could they not build a machine that would open the Gateway from this side? If the scientists of Richard Simons' day had been able to create it in the first place, the Seekers of Kronweld should be able to duplicate the machine.

He rose to his feet. His ultimate goal was the same, only one more obstacle had been put in his way, he told himself.

There was just a single moment when he looked into the *tara* to come and thought of Elta. It brought bleakness, unmatched by the darkness and the cold winds of Dark Land. He forced it out of his mind. There was only the present, and that all-important goal to which it would lead.

He walked towards the roadway that circled in front of the Temple. As he neared, he realized his additional predicament.

He was behind the purple, lethal line that completely inclosed the Temple and cut it off from the city.

He stood before it, staring down, when he heard a sudden exclamation nearby. He looked up to see a pair of Seekers in the doorway, standing in open-mouthed astonishment.

"How did you get in there?"

Before Ketan could answer, the second man exclaimed, "I know you! You are Ketan who desecrated the Temple. But they said you were dead."

"I'm not, you see."

The uniqueness of the situation inspired him. It *could* be a wedge between the people of Kronweld and their stifling superstitions if he took advantage of it.

"I have been through the Edge into the realm of the God. I have come back to tell you what is there and where we have come from."

They backed in fear at his blasphemy. "The Servicemen will take care of him," the first man whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, tell the Servicemen," said Ketan. "Tell all of Kronweld. Tell the people what you have seen and bring them here. Let them see how I am yet unharmed by the wrath of the God whom I have desecrated. Go and tell them I have a message for them."

They turned and ran. Probably they would get the nearest Serviceman, but that didn't matter, he thought. His story must spread, and anyone would do.

The Council and the First Group would still attempt to suppress his message, but the populace were Seekers, men and women who could understand the truth of his words, once their eyes were opened to the falsity of their inhibitions. It was these who must hear him.

He saw the first of the gathering crowd in the streets leading to the Temple. They were led by the two excited and exclaiming Seekers who had found him.

They crept closer. In the vanguard were a half dozen Servicemen, and all came slowly, with a queer sort of awe as if he had come back from the dead.

Ketan stepped back from the line, and the crowd flung questions at him which he left unanswered until there were too many for his voice to reach. The news was spreading swiftly.

"Seekers of Kronweld!" he cried suddenly. They became silent, their voices of anger dying away in ripples.

"You see me here," he said, "and wonder how I am yet

alive after I have crossed the forbidden line and entered the Temple and found the secrets of it.

"Yes, I have been in there. I have seen what takes place. Do you want to know what is there? Do you know where we came from?"

He paused, feeling the spontaneous wave of shocks that emanated from the crowd. He waited for someone to speak. But no one spoke. They only continued to stare in horror.

He looked about. He looked into their faces and saw that he had not gained a grip on a single mind.

"I'll tell you whether you want to hear it or not!" he exclaimed. "I'll tell you that you came from beyond the great Edge from a world that is ours by right of heritage. I have been to that world and it wants us back. Long ago, a group of great Seekers prepared the means for us to escape the destruction that came upon our home world and sent us to Kronweld for our own protection. Now, it is time for us to go back and rebuild that world. It is our heritage. It is the only reason for our existence.

"All of you must go where I have been and see for yourselves. But the Gateway is closed now. No new life will appear within the Temple of Birth until we reopen it. We must first reopen the Gateway from this side before we can go through."

He stopped. He looked upon them. He scanned a thousand faces and what he saw there shook him with a terror that he had never before known. In that one instant he recalled the words of the Director: "I have not studied Kronweld all these years for nothing. Success is absolutely impossible for you, yet you will go on struggling until the day Bocknor turns on his beam. That will be the amusing part of it."

He wondered if the Director were watching now, if his mysterious powers could pierce the Edge and enable him to know that Ketan realized what he meant.

As motionless as the golden image of Dorien, behind him, Ketan looked at the assemblage and knew that he had failed. A thousand *tara* ago they had created the myth of the Temple of Birth and now that monstrous creation bound them with chains. Only the stark reality of the Temple's destruction would convince them. That, and a glimpse into the world of Earth. Not words, not any man could accomplish that.

The murmur was rising from them now. They were recovering from the shock of his words. Someone threw a stone. A blast of heat and thunder and a moment's blinding light marked the instant it came above the protecting purple line.

"Blasphemer!"

The cry rose on the outer edge of the mob and traveled inward like a gathering wave. It washed over Ketan and left him sick and weary.

He remembered that other mob, the one in the village of the Illegitimates. This one wanted his blood just as surely as had that first one.

He must show them, he thought dully, through the weariness. Words were not enough. He must get to the Unregistereds, find what had become of them, and carry on his work with them. Even the Director had advised mockingly to do that. That old and withered husk held a mind that knew far more of Kronweld than did he, Ketan admitted bitterly.

He did not quite comprehend the suddenness of the next event—nor did the mob. Then someone shouted, "The line! It's been turned off!"

They came at him then. He ran up the low incline, straining to out-distance the irrational mob. But there was nowhere to go and the pain within him was overwhelming. He turned and faced them and waited until they swept over him.

He was alone that night in a single interior room of his house. In accordance with custom, it had been declared open for occupancy as soon as he was reported dead, but no one would live in the house of Ketan, the blasphemer, and so his things were as he had left them.

In every room that opened from the one he was in there were three Servicemen. Outside, a double line of them patrolled the house.

For hours he sat without moving. His mind was working only in retrospect. As time passed, the realization of the enormity of his mistake grew upon him. How could he have so underestimated the power of the suppression of knowledge through the ages of Kronweld's history? Branen, even, had understood its effect better than he. He had supposed the sudden revelation of truth would crush it. All the rest of the Unregistereds—Elta—the Director—all of them knew what those hundreds of *tara* of superstition had done.

Had Igon, in his eagerness, made the same mistake as he, Ketan wondered?

Somewhere the whole vast dream of Richard Simons had gone wrong. But where?

It centered in the Temple of Birth. The ancient scientists had never anticipated such a growth. They had supposed that life and birth would be normal in Kronweld except for the appearance of those who came through the Edge. Had the

ancients been correct the suppression of knowledge of life processes would not have existed. There would have been Seekings in medicine, surgery, biology, bacteriology, physiology, and all that realm of knowledge of whose existence William Douglas had spoken.

But something was present to create sterility in every man and woman who came into Kronweld. This meant that the cream of Earth's intellect had been drained off through the centuries and had not reproduced itself. Slowly, but inevitably, a reverse evolution of the combined society of Earth and Kronweld had taken place. The handful now living in Kronweld should have been a host of hundreds of thousands of Seekers. The scientists who built the pinnacle had failed because they didn't understand the world into which they plunged their choicest offspring. Ketan had failed because he hadn't understood his own people.

He slept finally and was awakened by a Serviceman who shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"The Council orders your presence," the man said.

"I am ready."

Ready for declassing. Ready to live as an outcast, a pariah among the friends he had known.

When he was dressed, they took him out to a waiting car and sat him between two silent Servicemen, who disdained even a greeting. The short ride ended too quickly for him and he was ushered up the lift of the Control Central and led to the doors of the chamber.

As he neared, he was puzzled by the commotion and the buzzing sound of a multitude of voices. He wondered where they were coming from. Then the chamber doors opened and he gazed in upon the filled hall. The hearing had been declared public. The Council must be sure of themselves, he thought despairingly.

He was led to the space in the semicircular table before the solemn Councilors. In tiered rows on all sides were gathered the two thousand Seekers in attendance.

Ketan turned to the Council. He wondered who was Leader in the place of the dead Hoult. None could be more vicious than the Statist.

Then he had doubts of that judgment. In the Leader's position sat Anot. A look of infinite pleasure was upon his small face as he glanced at Ketan.

Ketan had forgotten the tiny, ambitious geologist, whose lust for dominance reminded him of the Director. Like the

latter, Anot enjoyed power over larger and greater mentalities than his own. He was enjoying that power now.

The crowd had become hushed and silent, but Ketan could feel their gaze upon his back. Almost, he imagined, he could feel the hot breath of their sudden primitive savagery on his neck.

The Council before him was icy-faced. Anot rose slowly with deliberation and turned quietly about so that his gaze raked the entire audience. He brought it back at last to Ketan.

"Only once or twice before in the history of Kronweld," said Anot, forcing his high-pitched voice to the farthest listener, "has this chamber been filled on such an occasion.

"To be accurate, I should say that *never* before has there been such a situation as we have here before us. For today we are met to pass judgment upon one whose blasphemy surpasses any recorded by our history."

He pivoted about once more, letting his eyes take in the room and Ketan.

"This is not an ordinary hearing before the Council for the purpose of administering a reprimand. This man's transgressions have struck at the roots of our society and force upon us a retrospection of our entire structure of society in order that judgment may be rendered.

"We are not often called upon to consider our objectives in existence either as a community or as individuals. We go automatically from the Temple of Birth to our period of learning in the House of Wisdom and then take up our own Seeking according to our desires and abilities. Those having the highest gifts in Seeking are given the most respected places in our community and freed from the small but necessary tasks of producing food and buildings and conveniences which we all must have.

"Thus, we all find a satisfaction in existence. Those of us who have been in a position to view the expanding Wisdom and discoveries of the past few *tara* have been pleased to observe that the long goal of our race has almost been reached. We have almost come to the end of the Age of Seeking. Soon, we shall have discovered the secrets of all the Mysteries that lie before us and a new age will dawn in which we shall be permitted to occupy ourselves entirely with the enjoyment of those things we have produced. There shall be no more necessity for Seeking, because we shall know all. Then our minds and intellects will expand and abound with the beauty and pleasures to be found in the arts of our land and the wisdom we possess. All men shall then experience

the extreme happiness of existence in having arrived at the goal for which we set out long *tara* ago when the God first saw fit to place us here."

"Lie!" Ketan blazed forth. He whirled about and faced the tiers. "Do you . . . you Seekers believe a word of this? You whose only pleasure in life is in Seeking—do you believe you will find the supreme happiness in idleness when these already-dead old men of the Council have finally forbidden you to Seek at all?"

"Silence!"

The command of the Leader hissed at Ketan. A trio of Servicemen approached menacingly at a signal.

"You will listen and maintain respect for the Council or be removed while judgment is issued in your absence," Leader Anot glared down upon Ketan.

"I should, perhaps, thank you, however," he continued, "for exhibiting to this assembly the very qualities of the offense with which you are charged.

"There have, throughout the ages been certain Mysteries into which we know we shall not Seek, for they are Mysteries belonging to the realm of the God, upon which we shall not trespass.

"The foremost of these is the Mystery of the Temple of Birth. Each of us comes into existence in a miraculous manner which no man comprehends. Only those Ladies who have sanctified themselves and dedicated their lives to devoted service within the Temple are permitted to know anything of this Mystery, and it is not believed that they know fully how life comes into being there.

"But there are some among us who are not qualified to live in a community of Seekers respecting that which is sacred. They are those who view the tools of Seeking as hammers of destruction with which any irresponsible man may blindly go about tearing down the veils with which the God has shrouded the Mysteries that are our pleasure. They are those who cannot understand the difference between those Mysteries which man may unveil and those which belong to the realm of the God.

"They are those who would tear down the Temple of Birth, who would desecrate the human body by daring to cut into it in order to Seek into the Mysteries of it."

Anot leaned forward and pierced Ketan with the pinpoint gaze of his little eyes. "Such men," he hissed, "cannot be allowed to live in Kronweld."

Exile!

Something hardened and grew bleak within Ketan. He thought of the long dreary wastes of Dark Land, the hostile Bors—that would be his surroundings for the rest of his life.

But Anot had merely paused for dramatic emphasis. He went on now in deadly tones. "But since the opening of the Mysteries of Dark Land I say that all creation is Kronweld. Therefore, such men as this"—his finger stabbed out at Ketan—"cannot be allowed to live. I call for the death of this man!"

He sat down. The room was still. Then a low sob of horror swept over the assembly. Only once before in all history had such a penalty been called for—Igon, who was later given mercy and exile.

A confused murmur and a lone cry or two of protest was heard, but more slowly and more surely a thunderous note of approval grew, a surging, savage cry that turned Ketan's heart cold within him. Even the faces of some of the Councilors blanched at the torrent of fury that had been unleased.

Ketan turned about slowly, staring at the galleries of faces. He knew them, hundreds of them. They had been his friends. They had gone to the House of Wisdom with him. Now they wanted to kill him because he had tried to show them the world beyond the Edge. Here were not the men and women Richard Simons had intended to send through the Selector, he thought. Something had gone wrong in ages past and only bitter, clever savages had come through.

Leader Anot rose again, trembling with emotion. He silenced the mob. "The Council will decide!"

He turned to his fellow Councilors. "You have heard my call. Are there objections or debate?"

Ketan opened his eyes wider and looked about the semicircle and saw blank enmity on every face, every one but that of old Jedal who rose with tottering uncertainty. His voice was barely audible.

"I hold that this man is not guilty of any crime," he said feebly.

"Then you are as guilty as he!" snapped Nabah.

Anot ordered Jedal to continue.

"I know that you disagree with much that I hold to be true," the aged member said. "And I know that my words on this particular matter will carry no weight, for you have already in your minds judged him guilty. But I offer this: To commit one crime does not erase the fault of another. Granted that this man has transgressed in his Seeking, you propose a far greater crime in taking his life, for there is no means by which it can be done without committing a far greater desecra-

tion than that of which you accuse him. You cannot kill him."

Only the ring of judges had heard his feeble words, and Nabah spoke up craftily. "There is always a way provided. We can *allow* him to die. Starvation is a natural way of death that involves no desecration."

"That is denying him the most elemental privilege of obtaining food," Jedal objected.

"Enough of this!" Anot snapped. "We will find a way if that is the only objection. What is your judgment? Do you accede to my call?"

Only the aged Jedal demurred.

24

THE DEATH CELL WAS A ROOM OF HIS OWN HOUSE.

Escorted by a heavy guard of Servicemen, one of whom was armed with a Dark Land weapon, Ketan was returned to the same room in which he had been prisoner the day before. Without speaking a word, they left him alone and closed the door.

He knew he would never leave that room alive.

It was night by the time the ordeal in the Council was over and Ketan lay down in weariness from the experiences of the past two days.

His tired brain forced all thought out of it as he lay there, eyes staring in darkness. Thought was replaced by a panorama of shifting images that streamed across his mental vision. There were merely images, no thought sense or judgment associated with them.

As if he were only a disinterested spectator, his brain drew out the record of his life and paraded it before him. He saw again the day that he came out of the Temple. He saw the first days in the House of Wisdom, his first meeting with Elta, the first time he heard the story of the famous and infamous Igon, the moment he determined some day to follow in the footsteps of the great man, and the fulfillment of that dream when he actually penetrated the flaming wastes of Fire Land to go into Dark Land.

He saw the visions of the pinnacle that had so tormented him during those *tara*.

And then—it was no mere mental image—!

He was sitting upright and on either side were the two from the pinnacle. As if illumined by some ethereal inner light. Dorien was there on his right and Richard Simons on his left.

"We knew it would be difficult," said the scientist. "But we are depending on you. Do not fail us."

And then Dorien—he felt the touch of her hand upon his arm and it gave him a chill though her flesh was warm. "There is always a way out of difficulty. Sometimes it is such an obvious thing that you have overlooked it."

Then they were gone.

He was trembling in every muscle and moist in every pore. He rose and turned on the light. He was alone. For a moment, he wondered if he had dreamed it, but knew that he had not been asleep—knew it as he had always known that the visions of the pinnacle were of a reality. But what had caused this vision?

The Gateway was closed. Could projections come through the barrier anyway? He did not know. But he knew that he had friends—friends who were counting on him to complete their work. Friends who had lived and died a thousand *tara* ago, but friends, nevertheless.

It made him feel as if he had experienced a rebirth. They were counting on him. The thought rang like the reverberations of a mighty bell of undying tones. And what was it that the image of Dorien had said? "There is always a way—Sometimes it is such an obvious thing that you have overlooked it."

New life flowed into his brain and he began to consider his position, the possibilities of survival. They were few enough. The Council had put him there to die in the only way that would not break any of their laws—by starvation. Any thought of breaking through the cordon of Servicemen outside was vain.

How could he keep from weakening and eventually starving?

Food!

Slowly he sat down and laughed softly to himself, then turned out the lights. He pressed the secret combination on his refreshment panel and in a moment he heard the soft click of its levers. He felt for the tray. It was loaded with as hearty a meal as he could have desired. The Servicemen had not found the private, secret channels that he had connected to the food service of the house. There was food

enough in his storage compartments to last him many days.

Enough for exactly fourteen days, he thought.

Its presence meant that Serviceman Varano had not yet revived or been discovered. It would be just fourteen days until that event, then the Serviceman would reveal what he knew of Ketan's secret arrangements.

Ketan lost track of time. He purposely refrained from marking off the days and they grew in length until they were endless. The nights became long eons of nightmare.

Every waking moment his brain concentrated upon how to make an escape, how to contact the Unregistereds. In the narrow confines of the room there was nothing that any amount of ingenuity could turn into a weapon or means of escape. And if he could have escaped, there was no haven for him.

As the days passed and he knew the food supply was getting low, he was seized again with despair.

It was that day that he heard the first signs of his guards outside. There was a shuffling beyond the doorway and then the door opened abruptly. He stared at the figure that blocked it.

"Varano!"

The Serviceman stood erect and majestic before him, seemingly a head taller. Behind him were other Servicemen.

"So you recognize me," Varano smiled. "Perhaps you would even suggest we speak as equals again—and have me share your cell? And perhaps you would like to knock me unconscious again and put me in suspended life for an eternity this time. I—"

He stepped forward to strike Ketan, but his companions behind him seized his arms.

"None of that," they warned. "Your instructions are plain. Carry them out."

"What are you going to do?" Ketan said haltingly.

Varano laughed. "Me? I'm going to eat first." The other men stared as a tray of food slid out and Varano began eating with gusto.

"This is why he was so durable," Varano said between bites.

"Come on, this is no time for that," one of the others urged. "Take him and be gone so that we can leave this hole."

"It will be a great pleasure. Come along, Seeker Ketan. I have a place prepared for you."

"Where are you taking me? What orders do you have from the Council?"

"Since you cannot be persuaded to die here, you are to be taken to a more fitting locality. You shall be chained at the Place of Dying and remain until you are dead."

All reason went out of Ketan then. He lashed out at the Serviceman. He felt the pleasurable crash of his fist into the leering face and the surprised grunt of pain from Varano.

Then they were on top of him, pining him tight at the center of a milling mass of enraged Servicemen.

"Take him!" one exclaimed.

His arms were securely tied behind him. The circle backed away and he stood in the center with the glowering, bruised-faced Varano.

"March! I'll attend to you more fully when we're alone," the Serviceman added in a low tone.

Ketan preceded the man out of the room, through the house, and out to a waiting car. Slowly, as if in a nightmare, he walked. The innumerable Servicemen he saw standing about made thought of flight foolish.

His mind burned with the memory of the horrors he had heard of the Place of Dying. He had once talked to a man who had been there.

It had been described as a great room where sick and injured lay helplessly, groaning and shrieking in pain and terror, placed there and forgotten because they had become helpless and there was nothing that any man could do for them.

The customs and religious laws of Kronweld did not permit them to be killed quickly and painlessly any more than they permitted surgery. The bonds of love and friendship that were created by the families of Earth were of feeble strength in Kronweld because there was no such word as family. Mercy and sorrow over the dying were, therefore, short-lived.

Varano prodded him into the car and took the driver's seat beside him. They drove off in silence.

They passed quickly through the streets, flanked with the clean white buildings of woven patterns of glistening marble. How different from the ruin and decay of Earth, thought Ketan. There must surely be something in Kronweld that could lift its men to the heights that Richard Simons had dreamed for them.

They came to the outskirts of the city where the buildings gave way to the intensely tilled farm lands. Then these merged into the barren Outlands and the glow of Fire Land blazed in the sky and burned upon their faces. They turned towards the west, following the smooth road that led nearly

to the intersection of the curving ring of Fire Land and the black curtain of the Edge—where titanic, impossible forces met in withering fury that no man had ever approached.

Varano suddenly stopped the car. He looked around for an instant and then stepped out. "This is it. Get out," he ordered. He cut the bonds on Ketan's arms.

Ketan looked about in puzzlement. "This is not the Place of Dying. Where are you taking me?"

Varano was no longer sneering and bitter, but he was stern and tight-lipped. "To Hameth," he said cryptically.

"What—?"

But Ketan got no other word out. The Serviceman gripped him by the arm and shoved him along. They stumbled through warm lava dust and passed between great mounded dunes of sand and dust blown about by the hot winds that fanned out from Fire Land.

Varano's eyes were intent upon their path as if looking for a definite spot.

"There, over behind that dune," he suddenly announced.

They plodded through the stuff that rose in stifling clouds about their heads. They came around the curve of the dune that Varano had indicated.

Ketan uttered a cry of exclamation. "A shielded car!"

"Get in," said Varano.

In blind and total bewilderment, Ketan climbed into the shining, massive car. Never had he seen one quite like it. It could hold at least six men and a great amount of equipment. Its shields were smooth massive sheets of lead and aluminum—quadruple layers of it, separated by spaces filled with argon under tremendous pressure.

There was only one use for such a car—transport through Fire Land.

Varano took his seat beside Ketan and started the silent atomic motors. Slowly the ponderous vehicle moved forward through the soft dust, its twelve wide wheels pressing heavily upon the uncertain footing.

The machine gathered speed and drove through the valleys between the towering dunes. They turned south again and straight into the blinding fires of the forbidding land ahead of them.

The dust and wind rose about the car in a spewing fury. A sand blast sprayed upon it, wheeling it about and spinning it crazily in the loose dust.

Vision was almost impossible. Varano turned on the infrared visor that allowed a good penetration of the cloud.

Through it, they could see the rising curtains of flame and sheet lightning that tore incessantly through the air and spurted from the very ground.

Far ahead, a volcano was erupting, cascading molten rock down its sides, rock that gleamed with the fire of disrupting atoms and sparked ion streams into the air. The radioactive and electrical display gathered about them and inclosed them in a solid blossom of fire as they rode on.

The volcanic dust gave way shortly before the irresistible winds that blew it back from Fire Land towards Dark Land, and the path became a tumbled, rocky surface. Hovering now on the edge of a vast chasm in whose depths burned hellfires, now climbing through steep hills of crushed and burned stone, the path was hardly distinguishable.

Then abruptly, they came to the end. They were at the edge, peering down into burning vastness of red molten rock. A hundred feet below them it shot darts of lightning up from the chasm. Streams of frantic ions gathered on any available point of metal or rock that offered momentary haven, then tore on into space. The car, they knew, was glowing outside like a flaming meteor. Ozone filled their nostrils.

On either side of them, the chasm appeared to extend for miles. Varano seemed to slump in weary exhaustion.

"Can you take over, now?" he asked.

Ketan nodded. "Just tell me where we're going. I know the way through this blindfolded."

"Just get through—anywhere you can. All our old trails are burned out."

"All this doesn't make sense," said Ketan.

"It will. Let's see if you can take it through."

The Serviceman had abandoned all pretense of captor and captive. Ketan knew that he was being taken to some strange freedom, yet the actions of the Servicemen were incomprehensible. Ketan determined to see it through, whatever was being thrust upon him. This was escape. Of that, he was certain.

He slipped into the control seat of the shielded car and spun the wheel about. He backed away from the flowing, molten river and retraced their former path.

The day had nearly gone. Darkness was settling over the land, but there was hardly a change in their surroundings in Fire Land. The glow that engulfed them only took on a more yellow tinge.

The car slid perilously down the ramp of broken rocks and returned almost to the edge of the powdery desert. Then

Ketan swung sharply east. He bore steadily through winding valleys between burning mountain masses that sped by the windows of the car, testifying to his reckless speed. Varano clutched the side of the car, but he let Ketan have freedom at the wheel.

Dust and broken rocks of the terrain gave way to a solid black mass that half glowed with an inner light and heat of its own.

"Ketan—you can't travel on this stuff!" Varano cried. "It's half molten!"

They could feel the twelve wheels sinking in shallow impressions in the black rock as the car roared on. In Earth terms, that Ketan had become so used to, they were traveling nearly two hundred and fifty miles an hour over the plastic rock.

"We can make it if we go fast enough," shouted Ketan above the now whining motors. "This is the only way through the place if the old trails are burned out. I used this once before."

Varano made no reply. He merely sat as if hypnotized, watching the smooth-shaped mounds and valleys flow past the window. The heat within the car was growing in fearful proportions. Both men dripped unnoticed beads of sweat.

"This is the toughest part," Ketan said quietly. "Tell me, quick, is it worth it to go where we are going?"

Varano stared ahead of the speeding vehicle and gasped. The black rolling surface of the endless rock upon which they traveled became orange, then gradually blazed through blinding reds until it vanished in a molten lake of shining fire that stretched more than the width of the city of Kronweld. On either side, it stretched as far as they could see, slowly narrowing to deep chasms at either end.

The car was rushing towards the molten lake with the full speed of its motors. Nearly three hundred miles an hour now. Before Varano could answer Ketan's question he saw that he had only one answer possible. They could not stop now.

Before them stretched a narrow path of dully glowing red rock. A tiny strip of half solid mass that crossed the lake of fire. It formed a long, rising arc across. Varano saw that at one point it had been completely undetermined, forming a bridge. Only a thin shell arched over the lava.

Ketan saw it, too. And sweat burst anew on his forehead. That undermining had not been there before. The last time he crossed, the strip had been solid.

But it was too late to turn back now. The car would be upon the arch before it could be stopped. He added the last fraction of power that the motors would turn out.

The sheet of black rock vanished from before them and on either side all that was visible in their universe was the lake of boiling, surging fire that leaped at them with fingers of radioactive beams. The solid arch itself was scarcely visible in the intensity of its heat. Slowly but surely they could sense the wheels of the great car sinking into the half fluid mass.

Behind them stretched a quarter of the causeway. Ketan was nearly blinded by the incandescence of the path and blinked fiercely to keep the plunging machine from careening into the lake.

They thundered up the slight incline and could no longer see the apex of the causeway. The undermined portion was beneath them.

There was a lurch and the crash of breaking rock as the surface gave way. They got one terrible glimpse of the great cracks that suddenly spread from beneath their wheels to the substance before and behind them. They literally saw the causeway fall away below them. Yet they viewed it as impersonally as two quiet Seekers in a laboratory. They had no time to react emotionally.

They never knew whether death was upon them or not. The thundering momentum of the car flung it for a space through the air as it rose up the incline. It hurtled the free arc and landed with a jar that dug its wheels into deep ruts in the soft surface beyond.

The motors whined and groaned as the wheels slowed. But they held. They poured the energy of disrupting atoms into the wheels and bore the car steadily forward at a rising pace.

"Aren't we nearly there?" Ketan raised from his hard bed on the rear floor of the car and peered over Varano's shoulder. Ahead of them stretched the endless bleak plains of Dark Land. Overhead the perpetual clouds of volcanic ash and fog screened the light of the twin suns down to the eternal twilight of the Land.

Scraps of wild brush growth were whipping in the fierce wind, and an occasional spare tree raised naked arms to the sky. In the far distance there was a low ridge of hills.

Ketan recognized no aspect of their surroundings.

"How long have we been traveling?" He asked his two questions in a single breath.

"Another half day and we'll be there," said Varano. "We've been traveling a day and a half now."

Ketan made a mental calculation. If they had maintained speed, they had penetrated farther than any previous explorer into Dark Land. They had long ago passed the steaming swamplands that was thought to be the border of Dark Land.

"Want me to take over again?" Ketan offered.

"If you will, please."

Varano moved over and allowed Ketan to take the controls. "You may as well get some sleep," Ketan said.

"Couldn't take any more. There are too many things to think about after being away so long."

"Where are we going, anyway?" Ketan asked for the hundredth time.

And for the hundredth time Varano shook his head. "I can't tell you. Orders. You'll get all the information Hameth wants you to have when you arrive. I was ordered merely to bring you in."

The afternoon reached its peak of feeble illumination and began to fade. Hour after hour, Ketan kept the car rolling over the level plains at nearly three hundred miles an hour.

The monotonous whine of the motors lulled him and he tried to grapple with the problem of why they were speeding so aimlessly into the wastes of Dark Land. And who was Varano?

This factor tormented him as much as any other. The once subservient Serviceman had lost all the humility and deference that had characterized him when Ketan first knew him. He was bold and sure of himself now. There was a light in his eyes and a strength in his carriage that baffled Ketan.

"What will the Council do when they find you have let me escape?" Ketan asked.

"It doesn't matter much because they will never see me again. I can't go back. My usefulness to the Restoration in Kronweld has ended."

"The Restoration—?"

"I have said too much. Please forget that word until you hear it from Hameth."

The air grew cold with the coming of night and the desert gave way to low hills that grew slowly into towering masses of piled and shattered rock that lumbered towards the sky. Their tips grew white with snow. Ketan had not known that it existed in his world.

The depths of the snow increased and flurries began to

swirl lightly about them. In the lights that stabbed out ahead of the car, a million dancing flakes of white began to fall.

Varano was fully roused and peering anxiously ahead. "Take it easy," he warned. "The road gets narrow through the mountains here."

The warning was superfluous. Already the car had begun to slide and skid dangerously. The journey lengthened into the night, slowed by the howling blizzard that shortly raged about them. They had to slow to less than forty miles an hour.

But shortly after midnight of the first sun they reached the top of the mountain pass and looked into the depths of a tiny valley below. Lights glinted weirdly amid the swirling snow.

"That's it!" Varano cried. A flush of happy excitement was on his face. Ketan realized that, curiously, Varano loved this place, that Kronweld was nothing to him. All his loyalty and affection were for this hidden valley in the mountains of Dark Land.

They had stopped at the top of the pass. Now Varano took the wheel and eased the massive car slowly forward, down the long slope that led to the valley.

Silently, they slid down the ghostly lane through the white shroud of snow. Only the ill-defined path ahead of them was visible until they came suddenly to a blockade in the midst of it.

Varano pressed a button that slid a panel of the window down, and stopped the car. Two men, carrying what looked to be overgrown Dark Land weapons, appeared out of the night and halted beside them.

Varano spoke to them. "Instigator Varano reporting—with A-A Probable, Ketan."

"Proceed to Operations Center. You will be relieved of responsibility and Hameth will receive Ketan. We'll call ahead."

They drove on, but Ketan did not try to question Varano further. He knew that it was useless to do so. But all questions seemed close to being answered as they neared the city in the valley—and the mysterious Hameth.

The dark outlines of buildings appeared beside snow-covered streets as they came slowly into the outskirts of the city. Ketan could not make out any detail of shapes, but a strange nostalgia struck him as he thought of Earth and Elta and the Illegitimates.

The street opened into a large, lighted thoroughfare and great buildings loomed about a central square. In the center of the square rose the most magnificent structure of them all.

It was brilliantly lighted and shed radiance upon the snow for a great distance around. Atop the building a thin tower of metal needled towards the heavens.

Skillfully, Varano swung the great car into the square and along a pathway that led to an opening in the building. For a short distance they crept through a narrow passage, then ended in a room where there were a dozen other cars of assorted sizes and shapes, none so large and powerful as their own.

"This is it," said Varano. His mouth parted in a friendly grin for the first time during the treacherous journey. "I'll show you to your chambers."

They emerged from the car, walking with cramp-stiffened legs up an incline that led into the upper levels, and came out into a large deep-carpeted corridor. Numerous doors opened from it. They paused before one. Varano opened the door and they entered.

"This will be yours. You'll find everything you need. Hameth will come to you when he's ready. Then you will know everything—or at least what he wants you to know for the time being."

Varano turned and closed the door behind him abruptly.

"Wait!" Ketan cried. "When will—?"

But he tried the door and it would not open.

25

THE ROOM MIGHT HAVE BELONGED TO THE MOST RENOWNED of Teachers. The food panel was elaborate and confusing in the many selections that it offered. Mellow light suffused over the walls and luxurious furnishings with refreshing radiance.

He found fresh clothing and bathing facilities, and a soft bed called invitingly.

He ate and changed and prepared for Hameth's coming. He sat upon the edge of the bed to wait any call that might come. Through a music panel he listened to soft music playing.

It lulled him into restful sleep that lasted throughout the night.

He awoke with a start, trying to comprehend his surround-

ings. He roused slowly and sat up. It was then that he saw the other man across the room from him. The stranger sauntered forward until he occupied the center of the room.

Ketan opened his mouth to speak and closed it again without uttering a word. A quality about the man forbade speech. Ketan felt that he held the experience and wisdom of a dozen lifetimes within him. But he did not look old.

His face was weathered like the granite mountains of Earth. But his hair was black and thick. He was dressed only in brief trunks that exposed his bronzed, heavily muscled body to the invigorating air of the room and the radiance of the ceiling lights. Power and strength surged in that body as if to burst the physical bounds of the creature.

And somehow there was a strange, haunting familiarity about the man. But Ketan's mind could not fasten upon the feature that aroused a memory. He scanned the shallow lines of the face, the black shock of hair, the eyes—his gaze fastened upon the man's eyes. There was something there. There and in the close-set, sensitive lips. But the identity still eluded Ketan.

He spoke as Ketan rose and stood self-consciously before him. His voice was like the billowing of wind through Earth's great forests.

"You are Ketan," he murmured. "How long I've waited for your coming! Through the years I held out, knowing you would come, when they told me it was useless, that you were not the one."

Ketan's mind attempted to assimilate the strange meaning of the words, but there was no sense relation that he could establish.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Hameth, Chief under Igon."

"Igon! Then you can tell me where he is! I must find him."

"I cannot tell you without his orders. But I may tell you that you already know him, for you have seen him. You will know him when you see him again. For many *tara* he has known of you."

"I do not understand," said Ketan weakly. And in his mind he was shuffling furiously over the catalogue of those whom he had known.

Which of them could be Igon?

Branen—Matra, in disguise, but Matra was dead—William Douglas. He stopped. Was it possible that the mysterious leader among the Illegitimates was somehow the great Igon? Or in the pinnacle itself—Richard Simons. Perhaps the scientist

had not been merely light and shadow at all. Or among the hundreds of images in that reconstructed laboratory Igon could have been hiding.

There was no way of knowing. Then Ketan's eyes narrowed. What of the man, Hameth, himself? Just who was he?

Hameth was speaking again.

"Please sit down. I shall answer many of the questions that are in your mind. I have a great many things to tell you. But first, there is one question I must have answered. Do you still believe it possible to convince the people of Kronweld of their destiny and take them back to Earth, as you wanted to do?"

Ketan's head bent low and he glanced down at his bare feet that rested upon the soft warmth of the scarlet rug.

"No," he said slowly. "I was wrong. Their conditioning by the superstitions attached to the Temple of Birth is too strong. They could be convinced only by the impact of its total destruction and being thrown back into Earth as I was."

"Good," said Hameth. "If you had not answered as you did, I could have told you nothing more. Now that you have learned that one truth I can go on.

"There is another fact: You, yourself, will never be able to entirely overthrow the conditioning that you have received in Kronweld. Do you understand that?"

Ketan nodded again and looked up into the gem-hard lights of Hameth's eyes. "I know that, too. I thought after experimenting with the Bors I could endure the sight of blood. In the Kyab among the Illegitimates—"

"I know," Hameth interrupted. "You will gradually attain new habits and customs, but remember the man of Kronweld is always there beneath the new Ketan. And the man of Kronweld is a false, unreal person."

"But what is to be done?" Ketan cried. "Was Richard Simons wrong? Is all the commission of Kronweld to be abandoned?"

"No. We have to do as you said. Confront them with the destruction of the Temple and the reality of Earth."

"How?"

"That is what I have to tell you. I must go back to Igon's day. He was the first to be chosen by the mechanism Richard Simons incorporated into the Selector to bring him back to Earth. I think you understand how that operated. When an infant of certain predetermined characteristics appeared, the machine stamped upon his brain an impulse to bring him back through to Earth. The method of return varied so that

some would be sure to succeed. Other Gates beside the one in the Temple were provided. Igon found his in Dark Land. But, of course, they have all been closed by the destruction of the central Selector.

"Igon went to the pinnacle even as did you. He found the same things and was told the same story. Even as you, he came back and defamed the Temple of Birth and tried to tell his story. You didn't know that, did you? The real reason for his condemnation and exile was suppressed and eventually forgotten in Kronweld.

"As soon as he was banished he set about carrying out his task in a logical manner. He had learned the same lessons that you have so laboriously learned. So he set about organizing first those who came through to the pinnacle. Since him and before you there were nearly a hundred. All but a few who died are here now. Then he chose some from among the Illegitimates who were the most intelligent. He took some from among the common people of Earth, and even recruited a score or so from the Statists themselves. Among the people of Kronweld, he found only a few like your Unregistereds. Incidentally, if you have wondered, Branen and three fourths of the others are now here working with us.

"This organization that he built up, Igon called the Restorationists—dedicated to the restoration of Earth. You have a place in it of more importance than I can tell you now. You will learn later of the details."

"But how can we ever go back with the Gateway closed? We must find a way to reopen that," Ketan protested.

"I don't know what Igon has in mind. I have been assured that it will open when we are ready. We are instructed to go on exactly as if nothing had happened to close it."

"I don't see—"

"Neither do I. But we take orders from Igon."

Ketan looked into Hameth's eyes for a long moment of silence. He felt almost certain that the man was deceiving him somehow.

And then he knew. The fragments of familiar points of Hameth's features fell into place in his memory.

"I know you, Varano," Ketan said quietly.

It was a moment before Hameth's mouth gave way to the merest flicker of a smile. "I told Igon you would be sure to guess eventually. I hoped it wouldn't be so soon, though. My disguise was sufficient for a Serviceman of Kronweld who had never been seen as Hameth. But I was too close to you. My disguise was imperfect for that purpose."

"But what does it all mean?"

"Igon ordered me to take care of you personally. I was to help you get to the pinnacle by quite another plan. You upset things completely when you knocked me out, but you accomplished the final result on your own initiative, which turned out well enough."

"I'm sorry—I couldn't know—"

"No harm was done. Forget it."

"I don't see how you could assume a registered identity in Kronweld, one that had never existed."

"The real Serviceman Varano was a Statist. He is dead," Hameth said simply. "The reason for Igon's great interest in you, which you must be wondering about, is that he had access to your record made at the time you passed through the Selector as an infant. He wants the dormant qualities in you developed in order that he may use them."

"What have the Restorationists been doing here in this valley?"

"Preparing for the attack of the Statists."

"Is there no way of preventing that?" Ketan exclaimed. "With the knowledge and the Seeking possessed by the Restorationists, surely it could be avoided now, and a direct conflict circumvented."

"Perhaps it could be avoided. I don't now. But we aren't concerned with that. We do not want to prevent it. It must occur.

"You want it to happen?" Incredulous, Ketan had half risen to his feet. He sank down again, staring in disbelief at Hameth.

"Think a minute," said Hameth. "You have seen the Director of the Statists and Bocknor and Javins. Those three alone are enough to demonstrate to you that the Statists must be destroyed utterly, their power crushed. Can you imagine them submitting to the return of the Kronweldians in any peaceful manner whatever?"

"No. No—I can't, but I—"

"That's the only answer. We shall wait for their attack and destroy them completely and take over their rule. They will expect no resistance and it will be a simple matter to turn them back.

"A good many other things will be accomplished also by their attack and subsequent destruction. They will burst into Kronweld and begin annihilating the city. What do you think the effect of that will be upon the Seekers of Kronweld?"

For a moment Ketan let his mind imagine the destruction. He pictured the Statists—Bocknor, breaking through the Gate-

way with a projector beam that would sweep through the city like a great fiery knife. It would shatter the stone Temple and explode it into fragments that would spew out over the city. Then the beam would burn and destroy—

"They will wipe out Kronweld!" Ketan exclaimed.

"Some will die, perhaps," said Hameth solemnly. "That is the price they will have to pay for ignorance and superstition. I promise you this, though: We have gathered out all those who will be of irreplaceable value in our restoration of Earth. None of them will die."

"It should not be necessary for any to!"

"The man of Kronweld speaks again," said Hameth. "You haven't answered my question. What will it do to the Seekers?"

"If it won't destroy the superstitions of the Temple of Birth and the inviolability of the Sacred Mysteries then nothing will."

"That is our analysis. Before the city is damaged excessively our generators will appear and wipe out the Statists as they come through and then go on to Earth and destroy their citadel. When we have control we shall establish an orderly exodus back to Earth and a system of education to teach the Kronweldians as you and Igon and the others were taught the facts of Earth's history.

"But remember: The destruction of the Statists by force is essential, and the demonstration of our power in this manner is the only means of teaching the Kronweldians the truth of their situation. Do you understand that?"

Ketan dressed hurriedly after his private meal. He donned heavy, padded clothing which was strange to him, but Hameth had said that it was necessary in the cold outside.

Ready, he opened the door of his room and went out into the hall. Hameth was coming towards him still clad only in the brief trunks. He smiled in greeting.

"I want you to see our buildings and factories and get an understanding of the preparations we have made," he said.

It was snowing when they went out. Ketan stopped and put out his hands and tipped his head to feel the cold touch of it upon his face. A chill went through him as a gust of icy air swept over them, but Hameth did not seem to notice the cold upon his bare flesh.

Hameth laughed softly. "They are all quite astounded by the first sight of snow. But hurry; there are things to see and the time is short."

The city was almost as large as Kronweld. Hameth had

named only a few of those they had recruited as Restorationists. Ketan asked, "How many of you are there here?"

"About the same number as in Kronweld."

"But—"

"Birth is normal here. Already there is present the third generation of Restorationists who have been born and taught all their lives the significance of our work. They will be of most worth when we go back."

"Do you know why there is no birth in Kronweld?"

"It is something that Richard Simons could never have anticipated. Sterility is caused by the radiations of the first sun and by the radioactivity of Fire Land. We are protected from it here by distance and the haze that is always in the sky."

"Those who have been exposed to it can—"

"Those who have faithfully worn their leaden day cloaks are usually only temporarily affected by the condition. Most of those who have come to us from Kronweld have reproduced normally after varying lengths of time. But here is the generator plant."

They approached an enormous, inclosed building and passed inside. Towering above him, Ketan saw rows of silent, mobile monsters that filled the building. They were great, gray hulks that shone with highlights of the thousand points of light in the ceiling.

Dwarfed, scores of men worked in and about the machine in silence.

"What are they?" Ketan exclaimed.

"These are the mobile generator units which we will throw against the Statists when they first come through. Come inside."

Twenty wheels of adjustable reach supported the monster. The two men entered through a hatch that opened in the forepart of the belly between the rows of wheels that were half again as high as the men.

Inside the lighted interior an unfamiliar maze of machinery was presented to Ketan's sight. The shapes of the machines on the lowest level were orthodox enough to be recognized as power generators. Ketan made an estimate of their output from their size and it awed him that so much power could be created within this mobile weapon.

The second and third levels presented totally unfamiliar equipment. Banks of fat, oversize generator tubes occupied the second. The third was an entirely exposed turret whose only protection appeared to be a metal mesh that extended

over it. And then Ketan noticed that it went down to the base of the machine, held away by short insulating posts.

On the turret, an operator's position was behind a huge loop twice as high as Ketan and built of cable nearly as thick as his body. Opposite, across the turret, was a smaller loop, and between them extended a hollow rod through the axis of the loops. It appeared to have no visible support.

"Radiation is the most economical and effective method of converting power to destructive uses. These small generators are capable of throwing a beam from here to Kronweld," said Hameth, "but we intend to use them at closer range. Later, I'll take one out and give you a demonstration."

Without the demonstration, Ketan could vision the terrible power of those generators being poured into a beam of destruction. He wondered if there were anything in existence that would stand up under it.

"We'll go over and see the main weapon now," Hameth said.

They went out into the snowstorm again and crossed to a smaller building nearby. As Ketan glimpsed it through the snow curtain he exclaimed at its construction.

It was only a much enlarged duplicate of the turret on the small generators. It towered far above them into the blinding snow. But no flakes were falling upon that mesh.

They went out into the snowstorm again and crossed to a ward into a deep chamber that was hot with the escaping radiant heat of hundreds of idling power generating units.

"There's enough power here—" Ketan gasped.

"—to carve away the mountains about us in less than a breath's time," finished Hameth. "Come upstairs with me."

They went up to ground level and stood beneath the huge ring of the projector. Behind them were the controls.

"This unit is actually more mobile than the small machines," said Hameth, "or will be when the Gateway is restored.

"I wonder if you understand the full possibilities of this instrument of the scientists of the pinnacle. Opening of the Gateway simply means that a certain relationship is established between this plane and that of Earth. There is no definite spatial relationship involved. Passage from one plane to the other may take place at any point in either plane. It may be located at one definite spot as in the case of the Gateway through the Temple of Birth, but this is not essential. In fact, we have been using it for transport entirely within the confines of Kronweld. This is done by passing through to Earth and then returning here at the desired spot.

"Thus, we can utilize this property to locate either our

small mobile generators or the big weapon at any point we desire in Kronweld or Earth almost instantaneously."

Ketan was as much dismayed as buoyed up by the sight of the great engine of destruction.

"It's so great a waste," he said. "Time, materials, men's energies—"

Hameth gave a short, harsh laugh. "Wait until you have time to study the histories of Earth in the pinnacle. You will learn of waste, there."

Ketan felt the growth within himself. Contrasted with the impulsive Seeker who had defied the Council and first threatened to expose the Temple, he had come a long way.

It was not outwardly visible, perhaps, but he knew it, and the Unregistereds whom he met in the following days knew it by contrast after they had spoken to him for a time.

He had learned to know and understand something of three other great groups besides his own, the Illegitimates, the Statists, and the Restorationists.

Little by little he absorbed the details of the plans that Igon had made for the rebirth of Earth. He felt awed and humble before the wisdom and foresight that Igon had shown. But it was wisdom that Igon had gathered through many *tara* and Ketan did not feel abashed before it as he sensed himself growing and accumulating power as he devoured the results of Igon's long experience.

He devoted himself to a study of the methods and accomplishments of the Restorationists. A library in Operations Center gave him the story of three generations in the valley. Igon's plans had apparently grown as he went along. In the beginning he was only concerned with the gathering of a group who could understand the problem. He had no solution then, but the group spent many years in studying the millions of volumes in the pinnacle.

As the threat of destruction by the Statists developed, they interpreted that as a solution. Through an extensive spy system they learned in detail the plans of the Statists. They were sure of themselves and their plans were made with confidence.

Now they were ready, and the city was filled with an eagerness that overflowed and expressed itself upon every face. Ketan could understand their feelings as the prospect of the final accomplishment of their goal after the long decades of waiting. But even though he had always known it was necessary, except for the short moment when he had hoped

the Restorationists might find a way to avoid it, he could not feel a great elation at the prospect of the fierce and bloody battle to come.

His brain was tired from the endless racking desire to find a better way. He knew the Kronweldians, and he knew the Statists—and he knew that Igon was right. There was no other way.

The Restorationists themselves were a conglomerate mass that offered no single distinguishing characteristic. There were the determined, freedom-loving but unskilled Illegitimates. There were the poets and Seekers of Kronweld. And there were the aristocrats of an old but decadent culture from among the Statists. All of them had only the one point in common, a desire for union and freedom upon their home world.

Ketan was assigned to the technical planning authority which would execute Igon's plan of attack and defense when the time came. In such position he was required to learn the intricate details of dozens of complicated programs, to understand the functioning of every machine and weapon they planned to use. He learned to handle the mobile generators and was given a temporary command of a Unit composed of thirty machines.

Hameth, despite his thousand other duties, took upon himself Ketan's personal instructions. After days of mastering the intricate controls of the generators, Ketan was given one to take on a difficult maneuver.

"Take it over in the next valley," Hameth instructed. "The target is through the mountain. Your co-ordinates are in this sealed packet. You are to burn the target, but leave no marks farther away than fifty *turl.*"

Ketan stared at him. It was an almost impossible problem requiring the utmost co-ordination in synchronizing and phasing the waves rotating in the loops which in turn generated the beam of destruction in the hollow tube.

But he nodded. "On target." He waved as Hameth climbed down the companionway and left the generator through the hatch.

Ketan rolled the titanic machine along the bleak plain below the city where the maneuvers were being held. In the distance he could see two other generators widely separated. Where the others were he didn't know, but the entire Unit was participating.

Under the deceptively frail mesh that covered the turret of the generator, he seemed entirely alone in the universe. It

was snowing again on the plain and he was forced to use the infrared vision plates to see a length of the generator ahead of him. Above, he watched the flakes of white turn gently aside and slide down the invisible slope of force set up in the mesh. In such solemn isolation it seemed impossible that the loop towering above him could hurt a beam of terror and destruction into the dark unknown before him.

Shortly, he came to the valley designated by Hameth. Littering the valley floor were mounds of strewn wreckage that marked targets of previous days, abandoned and obsolete machines that had been brought here for trial. It was a graveyard of the predecessors of the monster whose back he now rode.

His attention turned to the difficult problem before him. He adjusted the speed control to the proper point, then turned it over to automatic operation. He adjusted the sight controls to the co-ordinates of the target and watched as they slowly came into line with the actual axis of projection of the beam. His hand rested on the beam focus control which required adjustment during the fraction of an instant that it was on, in order to assure its concentration on a single spot.

The snow was increasing in its blinding whiteness, but Ketan glimpsed dimly the squat, massive shapes of two other machines lumbering towards him. He wondered what their mission was.

But he couldn't be concerned with that. The completion of his own was at hand. He waited tense in every muscle for that terrible silent flame of destruction to come.

It never did.

In the white desolation of the plain Ketan glimpsed a figure that appeared suddenly out of the nothingness of the snow curtain. It was a bronze, half-naked figure running madly at inhuman speed—straight towards him.

During an instant's hesitation he thought it must be some wild hallucination. Then he threw the brake control to the limit. But the tremendous momentum of the generator could not be halted that quickly. The figure of Hameth disappeared out of his line of sight. Ketan thought he detected a faint jar and the machine thundered on.

When it came at last to a halt, he was already swinging down the companionway towards the hatch. The wind-driven snow felt like a sudden immersion in liquid fire as he thrust his legs out and followed with the rest of his body. Then he stumbled on beneath the belly of the machine, searching be-

tween the massive wheels and back along their deep tracks in the snow and mud.

In the path of those wheels the ice-hardened ground had melted under the pressure applied by the jagged steel treads and as instantly frozen again into a mold of the generator's path.

But there was no sign of Hameth.

Ketan raced frantically up and down the length of the tracks for hundreds of feet. There was nothing. Only mud and crushed bits of steel and glass and parts of long-dead machines in the valley graveyard.

The other two generators had come up now and their operators swung down through the hatches.

Ketan turned towards them, his eyes staring in shocked disbelief. "Did you see him, too?" he asked hoarsely. "He ran straight towards my wheels. I couldn't stop—"

One of the men nodded. Ketan knew him as a young third-generation Restorationist named Alva. "We saw him. He must have gone crazy. He surely saw you, yet he deliberately ran under your wheels. Where is he?"

"He isn't here."

It was their turn to stare. Then they searched again the length of those frozen tracks. There was no sign of the crushed and broken body of the leader of the Restorationists.

It was while the other two men were a dozen generator lengths away from him that Ketan saw it. It was just a length behind his machine, lying in the left track, a shining bit of glass and steel that shone in the blaze of light pouring from the open hatch of the nearby generator.

He saw a glimpse of bronze in the distorted pattern of a crushed arm. He bent down to touch it, then froze immobile as if the snowy blast had turned to liquid air.

After an interminable time he rose, and a thousand questions were answered. A sense of loss and an infinite sorrow tore a great sob from him that made the distant operators look up and shake their heads in pity.

Then he bent down and touched again that fleshless arm—with its bone of shining steel. He slowly traced the almost unrecognizable body outline, the twisted arm and leg shafts, the burst vessel of shimmering glass that was where the heart had been.

I know you now, Varano-Hameth-Igon, he thought. This was the way in which the great Seeker had conquered time. A bit of brain tissue to think and dream and control that

mighty body of imperishable steel and glass. That was all that had been necessary. Igon the immortal.

Why had he destroyed himself by running beneath the generator's wheels? Something must have gone wrong with the machinery of the body and put it out of control of Igon's brain.

The others were coming back. "We didn't find a thing," said Alva. "Did you?"

Ketan shook his head silently and moved away from the betraying wreckage of the body.

"It must have been a mirage, some kind of hallucination that hit us all. I'm going to see if I can contact Operations Center and find out where Hameth is."

But the other man had already gone into his machine and now he thrust his head out and cried in a voice of terror and triumph. "Operations Center calling all generators in. The Gateway is reopened. The Statists are attacking Kronweld. They have struck at the Temple of Birth!"

26

ELTA STOOD DAZED, AS IF POWERLESS TO CONTROL THE MOTION of her hand. Transfixed at her own destruction, she watched the slow crumbling and melting away of the mighty terraces before her.

The beam cut through the metal wall of the Selector in a long white gash that slowly turned to yellow and remained blood-red until the beam swept back again.

Twice, the beam traversed the long front of the barrier behind which the intricate mechanism lay. Then slowly and ponderously the upper portion began to totter and vibrate with a shuddering motion that increased in its terrible amplitude as one after another of the supporting beams was burned away.

She saw the altar on which Ketan crouched amid the blazing aura of the opened Gateway. He would not be harmed. The Gate had opened before she pressed the trigger of the gun.

Her lips formed a wordless murmur of farewell as she saw him disappear amid the final blazing coruscations of the halo.

Then it was dark and the altar tipped and plunged into

the boiling inferno of crimson, flowing metal. With the terraces gone, the intricate mechanism of the Selector itself was exposed to the beam. Blue flames of electric discharge arced between the close-meshed wiring until whole areas became sheets of rippling fire.

Hundreds of tubes of glass and metal collapsed under the point of the destroying beam. Some exploded in a rumble of thunder that further shattered the circuits as their gases were released and turned into isotopes.

Behind Elta, the massed unfortunates who waited with their infants were too bewildered to comprehend fully. But when they saw the altar and its encircling halo collapse and fall into the flames, a thunderous roar came from their throats that drowned out the crackling of the electronic fire and the exploding of circuit components of the Selector.

All the pent-up hatred and misery of generations who had been forced under the tyranny of the Selector to risk their children's existence was released at once. It became a torrent of inchoate verbal expression that shook the walls of the building and flowed outward in a wild cry of triumph over the vanquished enemy.

But Elta did not hear it.

Through the almost blinding moistness in her eyes she watched for the approach of the Statists who were fighting their way through the animal mob to reach her.

Methodically piercing the blazing ruin, she tried to pick out the spots that seemed critical and vulnerable. A half dozen times, she saw the figures of men rushing blindly into the spray of her beam and vanish like smoke puffs. She saw through to the great operating chambers where attendants placed the electrode caps over the heads of the infants and recorded the potentialities of their brains and characters.

A hundred infants must have perished with the Selector.

They were upon her then, a score of armed Statists who seized her arms in a crippling grip and tore the weapon from her hands.

For a moment she thought they were going to kill her there, so great was the rage and frustration upon their faces. She would not have cared at that moment. She had accomplished all she had ever hoped to accomplish in life—apart from the one dream that she had always known could never be anything but fantasy.

The Statists bore her forward through the mob towards a side door. If the hall had been less densely filled, they might never have taken her, but those only a few steps away from

her did not know what was happening. They knew only the tremendous, unbounded elation over the fact that the Selector was no more. And they knew that it could never be restored, for even the Statists themselves could never rebuild it.

As it was, only a few angry insults were hurled at the Statist guards and those bold enough to give vent to their feelings paid for it with their lives as the guards shot mercilessly into the ranks.

They hurried Elta out the side of the building and reentered at a nearby portal. She had no conception of where they were taking her, nor did she care. She watched listlessly as the walls of endlessly winding corridors passed her vision. Then they stopped before a wide door.

The Statists consulted a moment and the door opened. Elta looked in upon the huge chamber full of electronic equipment and her interest rose in spite of herself.

She didn't notice, until the voice spoke, the man-sized tube located centrally opposite the door.

"Leave us alone," the low, powerful voice said.

Elta chilled involuntarily at the sound of it. She knew now where she was—the fabulous sanctum of the Director, and that thing in the tube must be the Director, himself.

The Statist guards left at once and the door closed. Elta could not see clearly into the tube, but what she did envision sent a wave of revulsion through her.

She had heard tales all her life of the crippled and ageless Director, of the tube that held the half man, half machine and fed and kept him alive when he should have been dead long ago.

There was pity and disparagement and revulsion for his helpless state. She fought down an almost overwhelming impulse to turn and flee.

That would have been vain, she knew. She had destroyed the main instrument of the Director's power, and she was here to be dealt with. She knew that a quick death would be too much to hope for. She only hoped that her father, Javins, would not have to suffer for what she had done.

She thrust her head up and let the cowl of the cloak fall to her shoulders and pile behind her neck. She strode forward.

"That's better, my dear," the satisfied voice came again.

Those sightless eyes were looking upon her, and though she heard the voice, those withered lips never moved.

"I am here," she said. "Do what you are going to do quickly."

"Very quickly," he said. There was a sudden urgency in the

voice. "Come closer and listen carefully to what I have to say. Your father, Javins, is outside. He has with him the gauge of the Selector. I wonder if you know what that means."

She shook her head in stunned bewilderment. Her father here! What did that mean?

"The gauge is the mechanism that controls the positioning of the Selector. It is adjusted to the relationship between the planes of Earth and of Kronweld. We can build another Selector, but if the gauge and its setting has been destroyed we could never again get through to Kronweld.

"Even as you were destroying the Selector, I ordered your father to remove the gauge to safety."

"But no one knows the principles of the Selector! It can never be restored."

"But it can," the Director said softly. "It can so long as the gauge is safe."

The infinite calm of accomplishment vanished from Elta's mind. If what the Director said were true, the whole terrible problem was exactly as before. She had accomplished nothing by her risks. But what was her father doing in this? All his life he had expressed a secret, sullen dislike of the Director and the policies of the Statists. That's why she had originally planned to come back to him, to get his assistance, but it hadn't been necessary to ask it. He had never gone as far as Elta, but surely with the destruction of the Selector assured, he would not move to salvage it.

The Director read her mind. "Your father and I have worked hand in hand in many things that would surprise you," he said. "We have followed your activities with pleasure. It was unwise for you to attempt to kill your sister, however. Unwise, and unnecessary."

He was playing with her, Elta thought. Enjoying this cat-and-mouse play before he killed her by some slow and torturous method. Both her and her father. Somehow the Director had heard of Javins' talk and was avenging himself now.

"I was not quite correct in saying that we can duplicate the Selector," the Director said. "We do know, however, where the information concerning its construction can be obtained. Your assignment is to go with your father and obtain that information for me, and open a Gateway again into Kronweld."

It was senseless and without meaning to her. If he were merely playing, he was leaving himself no place for a

delicious climax. It was all so fantastic that she knew it was lies before he attempted a denouement.

But he was not stopping. "Would you not like to see Ketan again?" he said.

A sob escaped her lips. "Please kill me and be quick."

"You will go into the forest beyond the airfield. Javins knows the place. Still there is the ship in which Ketan came to the city this morning. William Douglas is waiting for him. You will tell him what has occurred, and ask him to take you to the pinnacle. There you will find sufficient information to enable you to reopen the Gateway."

"The pinnacle! You know where it is?"

"I was there many times—quite a long time ago. Come here. Step close to the tube. I'll lower the field." His voice seemed to take on a strange note of pleading.

Elta felt the force field that had pressed her away from the tube relax, and she almost fell forward, not realizing she had been leaning against it for support.

She caught herself and was almost near enough to touch the tube. The obscene horror within it was quivering with spasmodic motion as if an electric current were flowing through a corpse.

Through the mist of horror she saw that fully half the body was gone, destroyed in that long-ago accident that had nearly taken the Director's life. The figure seemed to be struggling within the tube to raise its arm, but dead muscles refused to come into play.

The Director tried again, and then with ghastly contortions, the twisted arm raised like a dead tree branch torn about by the wind. Trailing filaments of wire hung like a spider's web.

"Look."

Even the artificial voice seemed to reflect the intense pain of that effort at motion.

As if hypnotized and unable to disobey, Elta stared down at the remnants of that arm. "I don't see—" she murmured.

Peering closer then she saw it, that telltale purple mark of the Director's brand that had been stamped a century ago when he went through the Selector.

"What should I see?" There was nothing significant about the repulsive sight.

"Can you read it?" The Director gasped for breath under the exertion. "Quick!"

Then the arm collapsed and fell at his side. He was no longer able to maintain the position. But it had been long enough. Elta had seen what he had meant her to see.

She gasped and her universe tumbled and collapsed about her. "You—a reject!"

"I was the first to come back. Does that mean anything to you?"

For a moment she stared in fascinated silence. Then she breathed a single word.

"Igon."

"Yes."

"There are a thousand questions in your mind now," the Director said. "But there is no time for them to be answered. Trust me. You will some day learn all the answers. Remember that I am letting you go when I should order your execution if I were nothing but the Director of the Statists. I sent Ketan back to Kronweld to keep Bocknor from killing him. Remember those two things and do as I have asked. Now, go quickly. Javins is waiting for you outside that door. He knows the way to William Douglas."

A door opened in the wall at Elta's left hand as if at the Director's control. Mechanically, Elta turned and walked out, as if her body were under some control not her own.

A moment after she had gone a figure entered the main doorway. The Director scanned him with his electronic eyes. "You heard, Bocknor?"

The fat, sharp-eyed Statist nodded. "Very clever, I think. But are you sure they know the way to the pinnacle?"

"Of course. William Douglas and Ketan have been there. William Douglas will take them there. It's up to you from now on. Follow them carefully and see that you don't lose them. I can't be sure that Elta will ever contact me again. All I can know for certain is that I think you know what the results will be."

In the corridor, Javins was waiting for Elta. When he saw her he gathered her wordlessly into his arms.

"Father!"

After a moment he held her off and looked at her, then released her abruptly. "I'll have to tell you later how good it is to see you. We haven't any time to lose," he said. He bent down and picked up a small, heavy leather case at his feet.

"Tell me what it's all about," Elta pleaded. "Is the Director actually Igon from Kronweld?"

Javins dropped the case and clapped a hand over her mouth. "You little fool," he said harshly. "That could mean his life if anyone heard you." His eyes darted about the corridor and the long thin lines of his face deepened with worry and fear. He relaxed his fierce grip upon her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He bent down and retrieved the case. "Forgive me. But you don't understand the magnitude of our task. Or the dangers of it. The success of his lifelong plans depends on our next few days' work."

Subduing the question in her mind, Elta drew the cloak about her and raised the cowl over her head. She followed silently behind her father. The stoop of his tall figure, and the fear and anxiety she had seen in his eyes touched off a pang of pity within her.

All his life he had been a mild-mannered, disgruntled servant of the Director. Now to find him involved in some incomprehensible intrigue was almost as startling as the revelations made by the Director. Director Igon.

He hurried her out to a waiting car and they sped through the city towards the airfield.. Not quite there, they turned off the road into a twisting, blind alley that wound past rows of dirty, partly ruined and abandoned dwellings. It ended at the edge of the encroaching forest.

"We'll have to go the rest of the way on foot," said Javins. "It's a long walk, but the road is a ruin."

They started through the forest, went around the airfield at a distance that would not betray their presence to any onlookers on the field. Eventually they came out upon the broken concrete highway.

Javins broke the silence. "I understand you know this William Douglas. Tell me what he is like. Will he cause us trouble?"

"I only saw him once. He is a doctor who lived in Danfer under a false brand for many years. He is much more intelligent than I had always thought the Illegitimates to be, however, I don't know whether you can make him believe your story or not."

"He is one of us, a member of a part of our group designated by limited knowledge, though I have never met him. He was sent back to accomplish certain work in organizing the Illegitimates. An unforeseen accident was responsible for the death of his wife and child. He may have been embittered and have turned against us because of that."

"He is loyal to Ketan and believes sincerely in what he was trying to do, if that means anything to you. Please explain what this is about. I don't understand any of it."

Javins turned and viewed her with a smile. "I'm afraid you will not be so pleased when you know. You almost succeeded in destroying all our plans. Fortunately, your acts could be

turned to our advantage. That's the only reason you were allowed to go on."

"But what are your plans? Why do you wish the Gateway reopened? Surely not to—"

"Kronweld must be returned to Earth."

"How can anyone who understands a single factor of the problem believe that such union can take place? Even Igon—"

"I was told not to argue with you about it. As if I didn't know my own daughter well enough to not need any such instruction."

"I still will not help you, then," she replied solemnly. "I will fight it. Kronweld is the greatest civilization that has ever existed, but bringing it here would destroy it. The Statists, not Kronweld, would survive. No more than a generation would be required to wipe them out."

"Don't you think that Igon has considered all that, and planned for it? You don't realize the strength of the man. His is the greatest brain that has ever been born upon the Earth. A hundred years from now, his name will be deified. But here I am, arguing with you. We will not discuss it further until we reach the pinnacle. Igon wants you to see it and believe."

"I will never believe. I am still fighting you. I want you to know that."

Darkness set in with three fourths of their journey ahead of them, but Javins had counted on that. He did not want to frighten William Douglas away. There was no way of communicating with him.

They went on more slowly, picking their way with the occasional use of a powerful finger lamp that Javins carried. Elta was swiftly becoming exhausted by the day's events and the long journey. The slowly healing burns upon her legs were painful.

At last Javins came to a halt and peered intensely at the landmarking trees and boulders. "This is it," he said, "if Igon was correct. The ship and William Douglas would be about a mile to the left over that ridge."

Elta didn't see how it would be possible for them to find a small ship in the blackness of the forest night, but she was too weary in body and mind to demur.

Her father seemed able to pick his way unerringly through the dark shadows about them. A dozen times she stumbled over hidden obstacles and he lifted her up, until he took her arm with his free hand and guided her through darkness.

The Director had told him something of what to expect, but he had imagined nothing as shining and beautiful as the slim-pointed cylinder that spoke of ancient workmanship as it glinted in the starlight. He knew it was a far superior vessel to any built by the Statists.

Javins shook off the fascination of it and peered anxiously about. There was no sign of the Illegitimate. Javins wondered if he were in the ship. The hatch in the base was open.

"You go in and search for him," Javins told Elta. "He knows you and will not be frightened by your coming. But I remember what you said. Don't try to persuade him to escape with you."

He drew out a tiny hand gun. "I will follow you shortly and be in the ship before it could take off."

Elta glanced at the gun and shrugged and marched across the small clearing. In the recesses of her mind she wondered if the gun were meant as a threat to her or to William Douglas.

She reached the hatch in the base of the ship and called his name. At that moment there came a sharp cry from behind, across the clearing. She turned in time to see the figure of her father hurled to the ground. She raced back and faced William Douglas across the fallen form.

"Elta!"

"Quick!" She pointed to the fallen leather case her father had carried. "Turn your gun upon that and destroy it!"

But William Douglas' last impression of Elta had been as an opponent, crafty and advantage-taking.

"Where's Ketan?" William Douglas asked. "He went into the city this morning. Have you seen him? And who is this man?" The gun of the Illegitimate came up in a threatening gesture.

"I'll tell you everything, only please destroy the box first. You must!"

"You are an intelligent man, William Douglas. It would be best to investigate, first."

They both whirled at the sound of Javins' voice. He was raised up on one elbow, shaking his head and feeling the lump on the back of it.

"Who are you?" William Douglas demanded.

"Father of the zealous young lady, and executive assistant to Igon. The key is Richard Simons."

Slowly, incredulously William Douglas lowered his weapon. "What do you want of me? It's been months since I heard that key. Come into the ship and tell me."

A bit unsteady on his feet, Javins picked up the case and

took Elta's arm as they followed the Illegitimate to the ship.

"Don't look so downcast," he said softly.

Elta made no answer.

In the ship they sat at an unused chartman's table in the navigator's cabin.

"All your questions can be answered very quickly," said Javins. "Ketan was captured by the Director and returned to Kronweld as a punishment, to be destroyed there when the Statists exterminate the entire realm. Immediately afterwards, Elta destroyed the Selector, a deed which was anticipated by Igon, and he ordered me to remove the heart of the machine so that the Gateway could be rebuilt at another time. We have been instructed to take this gauge, as the device is called, to the pinnacle and reconstruct the Gateway. We shall contact Ketan as soon as this is done and make arrangements for his people to come through.

"Incidentally, my daughter is still unconvinced of the wisdom of this, as you saw by her desire to destroy the gauge. Igon, however, believes she can be convinced by a visit to the pinnacle and be made useful to us."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take us to the pinnacle as quickly as possible."

Elta remained in the navigator's room as the ship rose in the night. She did not move from her position in the little cell which gradually oriented itself along the horizontal as the ship rose and pointed its nose southward.

As she stared out the port in silent introspection, she tried to reconcile herself to one or the other of the extreme positions of Ketan and Igon, or of the Statists.

Certainly the plan of the Statists was one of insane murder and destruction.

But was that of Ketan's and Igon's group any less so, even if indirectly?

It was strange that she had found no one in accord with the middle course plan that seemed so sane to her—eternal separation of the worlds.

True, such a plan meant extinction of Kronweld through the sterility of its people, but surely that was far better than the consequences of either of the extreme plans.

She thought of Igon with his hundred years of knowledge and experience in both Earth and Kronweld. She would be willing to bow to that experience and attempt to understand his goal.

If she could be sure that Igon still lived!

As she pondered, the more unlikely it seemed that the remnant of a man in the citadel of the Statists was anything but the Director.

As such, he had been the one to conceive the plan of destroying Kronweld. Igon would have originated no such scheme for any purpose whatever. Under the Director's leadership, hunter Statists had slaughtered Illegitimates by the thousands. Even now, a deliberate and scientific program of extermination was going on throughout the world to wipe out the isolated bands of those who had escaped the Selectors throughout the decades.

That brand he had shown her. It could be part of his subtle scheme to get her aid in reopening the Gateway so that Kronweld could be destroyed.

But final judgment would wait, she decided. She would see the pinnacle and learn more of her father's dealings with the Director. She would be certain of success when next she acted.

In the meantime, the thought of the reopening of the Gate made her heart beat faster. The temptation to go through it, to see Ketan again was almost overpowering. What if it were opened, and she went through—and left behind a means of destruction which would destroy the gauge, the pinnacle, and all possible evidence that would lead to another path from Earth to Kronweld?

She sat staring out into the silver night, her mind possessed by furious action at the thought of such a possibility.

The pinnacle rose above the swirling sand clouds like a mountain peak above a sea of fog. William Douglas pointed forward. "There it is."

Beside him, Javins strained eagerly, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness. "No wonder it was never found," he murmured. "But what a sight! I've lived for this. A thousand times Igon has told me how he first came here, afoot after traveling for days without food over the desert. He was nearly dead when he reached here. He stayed more than a month recuperating. When he left, he took one of the vehicles stored here, a small land car. He showed it to me once."

"Igon must be *old*," said William Douglas. "He can't live much longer. What will happen when he is gone?"

"He expects to live only a few more weeks or months at the most, but he has prepared for his death. The plan for the restoration of Earth will go on."

The ship circled slowly and caught the first rays of dawn

as it swung back towards the pinnacle, towards that dark, needlelike spire. William Douglas was hesitant about his ability to drop the ship through the narrow opening in the top of the spire. Even as he circled, he saw it open below them as if their arrival had been awaited.

He shot over the opening and turned the nose of the ship skyward. And then he knew he wasn't going to have to worry about setting it down into the hole. A force gripped the ship like some great hand and removed it entirely from his control. Slowly, it settled until the walls of the pinnacle rose up on all sides like black curtains.

Javins was silent with amazement as he saw the manifestation of the automatic machinery within the pinnacle. "Igon told me of this but I could never picture it as real."

"Wait until you see the rest of it," said William Douglas. "You'll know you're dreaming."

As they emerged from the port, Richard Simons and his daughter were waiting.

"You are back soon," the scientist said as he advanced with a smile and outstretched hand. Then his face sobered. "But there are strangers. And Ketan is not here. What of this, William Douglas?"

"These are from Igon," said William Douglas. "Ketan went back to Kronweld. We have come for information on the construction of the Selector. It has been destroyed, all but the gauge."

"What is the key?" the scientist turned to Javins.

"Richard Simons."

His smile broke again. "Very well. We must be careful in risking the pinnacle, you know. Unauthorized entrants would be instantly destroyed."

"It is late. You must be tired," said Dorien. "Would you like to rest until morning and we will give you the information you desire?"

Elta was staring at the girl with the same shocked recognition that Ketan had shown. It was like the golden image before the Temple of Birth suddenly come to life.

"We would like very much to rest," said Elta.

"The information," said Javins, "is most important. We'd prefer that first. I'm sorry"—he turned to Elta—"I had forgotten what a day you have had. You rest. We will see the plans for the Selector."

Reluctantly, Elta was forced by her own weariness to agree. She disliked leaving her father alone with the precious

information, but she knew she was incapable of enduring more without rest.

Dorien led her away.

The sunlight that had touched the plane when it was high above the pinnacle descended to the desert in a short time, but Elta did not awaken until the sun was high. The light came through the latticed openings of the curtain and woke her. She stretched in luxurious comfort upon the soft bed and breathed deeply of the cool, fragrant air of the room. She drew the cutains then and looked out upon a landscape that made her gasp.

A garden of flowers stretched to the hills as far as she could see. On open spaces of green grass lambs played and leaped in the sun. Beside the window a slowly moving shadow of a tree echoed the rhythm of the breeze.

"Do you like it?"

The soft, musical voice came from the doorway. Dorien stood there smiling and then advanced and sat on the edge of the bed.

"It's beautiful," exclaimed Elta, "but how—"

Dorien explained the pinnacle and its illusions and realities as Ketan had heard them. An unreasonable, haunting sadness brought tears to Elta's eyes with the thought that this lovely girl had lived and died more than a thousand years ago.

After Elta had dressed, they all had breakfast in the same dining room where Ketan and William Douglas had eaten. The images of the two ancient ones went through the motions of eating and entertained them with fascinating stories of their own age.

Javins was amazed and overjoyed at the experience of being privileged to view the wonders of the pinnacle. Regarding the Gateway he said to Elta, "It's simpler than we thought. With the abundance of equipment here we can build around the gauge in five or six days a unit large enough for our needs. All the other circuits that were built into the Selector had to do with the examination of the infants. The Gate itself is simple. It requires tremendous power, but that's already available here."

Elta made no answer. Since arising, the sensation had been growing in her mind that she was in the grip of a strange, unreal power. A power that went beyond the bounds of all understanding and was slowly molding her thoughts and beliefs to its own pattern.

She couldn't resist it, it was so gradual and persuasive.

But she wasn't sure she wanted to resist it. The thing she wanted to do was explore and delve into every secret of the vast pinnacle. This was the same power that had infolded Ketan and established his unyielding position. She wanted to know it, to experience those same forces that had molded him, and try to understand what had been in his mind.

She felt somehow that her own standards were slowly shattering. Yet her one pivotal question remained unanswered—and apparently unanswerable.

The Kronweldians were not fit to govern. There would be conflict and death and terror when the two civilizations met and—she could envision no other possibility—the Statists would exterminate the benevolent invaders.

She followed her father and William Douglas and the image of Richard Simons to the laboratory where they were rebuilding the mechanism that would once again open the Gateway. Javins looked at her questiongly, but she said nothing. The change was in her eyes and he saw it.

With Dorien she went through the pinnacle. She saw the great underground power chambers hundreds of feet below the surface of the desert where Ketan had not visited. She saw a score of fantastic landscapes of gardens and forests and mountains and lakes. These had been built by the ancient scientists for their own enjoyment in anticipation of having to live much of their lives in the pinnacle, but most of them had been busy to the last with their work of gathering the remnants of Earth's science.

That afternoon they came to the laboratory where the replicas of Earth's scientists worked over their ageless dreams. As Elta came out upon the little balcony that overlooked the room, she gave a little involuntary start of stage fright at what appeared for an instant to be a vast audience watching her.

Dorien touched her arm. "They are the same as we."

The impact of the sight before her penetrated more deeply into her consciousness than it had into Ketan's, for she caught the meaning of it instantly.

"Let's go down," she said breathlessly.

They walked among the busy images and Elta talked with them. Talked with Archimedes and Aristotle, Mendel and Descartes, Newton and Einstein. She listened and was lost in their dreams and visions.

She spoke with the scientists who had lived just prior to Richard Simons' own day. She saw the last days of their tragic history, when they groped for a solution to the night of

blackness that was encroaching upon the world, when they tried to find a logical way to preserve ten thousand years of science against the invasion of the barbarian. And more than that, to preserve the intellects that would be born in that dark era.

She sensed the frantic urgency of those last decades before darkness closed down. She understood the dream of Utopia that they dreamed of in the strange land of Kronweld.

It was easy to vision Ketan here among them. She could picture him overpowered by this revelation of a mighty dream. But with him there had been ready and willing acceptance with no thought of criticism. He had been told what the plans for Kronweld were and Elta knew he had not stopped to criticize the plan because he had no knowledge upon which to base judgment. He could not answer the question of whether or not they were prepared to govern because he did not comprehend the problems involved.

There was no answer within the pinnacle, she knew.

It was two months instead of Javins' optimistic five or six days before he peered through the reopened Gateway into Kronweld. It was the first he had ever seen it. The vision of its marble palaces and the purple curtains in its sky was like some exotic dream.

He sat before the small instrument panel controlling the forces connecting the worlds. The vision was open to him as if through a doorway beside him. And, indeed, he could have stepped through that doorway into the world of Kronweld, for this was a simpler arrangement than the Gateway in the Selector. It did not require the instantaneous opening and closing to prevent as much as possible a vision from one world to the other as was necessary in the Temple of Birth.

He shifted the Gateway about, careful not to bring it too close to any individual who might have been surprised to suddenly look into the space beside him and see a queerly dressed individual sitting at a table of strange instruments.

He wondered where Ketan was and how he could be located, but that was not his task. His part was done now. He moved to call the Director on his private circuit.

"That won't be necessary. I will take charge from now on. Your part is done."

Javins whirled at the sound of the familiar, hated voice.

"Bocknor!"

"Your colleague."

"How did you get in here?"

"Richard Simons," the Statist grinned mirthlessly.

Javins did not move. He knew resistance would be vain in the face of the weapon in Bocknor's hand.

Then Bocknor advanced. "Maybe it would be a good idea if you completed that call to the Director. He would like to know that we are ready."

In a daze, trying to fathom what this turn of events meant, Javins called the Director and in a moment his face appeared on the communicator. His voice came to them.

"I have been watching you," he said. "I see that you have completed your task, Javins. You have done well and I will remember you. Bocknor's task is just beginning. You may proceed. I shall watch with interest."

"Attack?"

"You may set the hour."

Bocknor cut the circuit and called half a dozen others. From the corner to which Bocknor had driven him, Javins watched the screen and wild horror overcame his senses.

He saw bank on bank of fearful atomic generating stations and the great tubular projectors they fed. There were six of them stationed within great forts within the city. They had been built without any knowledge of it coming to him. And anyone of the projectors could wipe out the pitiful city of Kronweld in a single instant.

Bocknor called his commanders one by one. "Attack time, three hours," he said. "Are you ready?"

One by one they acknowledged.

The click of the switching circuits was magnified a thousand times in the hollow chamber of the laboratory. The sound swelled and tumbled about Javins', ears. It grew to a crashing roar that was the thunder of the shattered segments of his world. All his life had been based on the one precept: The Director was Igon who would some day unite the worlds.

That precept was gone now.

27

FOR THE TIME OF A SINGLE BREATH ALVA AND KETAN remained motionless, staring at each other, while the soft white flakes rocked their slow pendulous way down from the sky.

"Attack!" breathed Alva. "What if that were Hameth we saw? But it couldn't have been. He's got to lead us. He's the only one who knows the full details of the defense and attack plans."

"It couldn't have been he," Ketan murmured. "We only imagined it. Let's get back. Our generators will be needed."

His mind seemed dulled by the sudden blankness that had appeared, the blankness of the revelation of Hameth's identity and his destruction.

He climbed through the hatch and up to the control turret of the generator. Automatically, his fingers found the controls and he turned the machine about and headed towards the valley, following behind the other two machines that were now almost invisible in the curtain of snow.

Against the white background he kept seeing the image of a crushed and shattered form, roughly human. A form of steel and glass and copper and plastic. He tried to tell himself that the whole incident was only the wildest imagination. He couldn't possibly have seen the near naked form racing through the snow. That alone was insane enough.

But Alva had seen it, too. And the other driver.

They hadn't seen it, he told himself, and closed his mind. Nor had he seen that spot of glistening wreckage in the ruts of the generator's wheels.

His communication panel was on a direct circuit to Operations Center. He could hear orders given in crisp, sure voices by the subordinates in temporary command. The attack and defense plans were well laid out. The men knew their places. Hameth himself could almost be spared except in emergency conditions. But emergencies would certainly arise. No one could take his place then.

As yet Ketan's name or the number of the generator he occupied had not been called. He knew it was unlikely it would be. He knew where his place was and he put on all possible speed to reach it. There were emergency orders, however, which had been created by Hameth to be opened in his absence during any such crisis. They might change everything.

At that moment the communicator spoke. "Ketan—driving generator three-twelve."

He gave a start. "Responding."

"Emergency orders require your presence in Operations Center at once. In the absence of Leader Hameth you are delegated in temporary command to execute defense plan G-12. Respond."

"Responding," Ketan answered mechanically. "Use the interplane transfer."

Two segments of his brain were swept with utterly contrasting thoughts. One dwelt on the incredibility of his position. Designated in temporary command. There must be a hundred men more suited for the post, he thought. Yet—

He thought of the long hours and days that he had spent with Hameth, the merciless drilling until he knew the combat plans with the familiarity of old habits. He wondered if there were actually any other men who had been given such careful and now obvious drilling. Had Hameth anticipated his destruction before the attack?

The other segment of Ketan's brain was swiftly going over the memory-photographed plans in Operations Center. He called swiftly back into the microphone.

"Give me the attack pictures."

While preparations were going forward to bring him bodily back to the Center by means of the Gateway, the subordinate answered, "There is only one break-through. A single beam burst through the Temple of Birth. No damage has occurred in the city as yet."

"Order the Ladies out of the Temple—the survivors."

"That has been done."

"Array a mesh before it."

"Done."

"Excellent. How many projectors are the Statists using?"

"Reports indicate six forts, mounting an unknown number of projectors. It is believed there is only one to a fort, however."

Ketan frowned. He couldn't understand why Hameth hadn't been able to get more accurate information with his elaborate intelligence service. It seemed unlikely the Statists would have so few projectors, unless they were of terrific magnitude. But then they did not anticipate any opposition from Kronweld. Probably the six forts seemed an insanely huge force for the job of wiping out the helpless city.

At that instant a tearing, blinding sensation blotted out all consciousness for a moment, then he found his machine beside the great spiring Operations Center.

A driver was waiting to take over the generator, and Ketan hurried into the building, the great planning chamber that was the brain of the defense of a world. It was filled only with a soft hush of sound and occasional sharp commands that in no way indicated the momentous events occurring.

In the center of the room a huge map showed Kronweld,

Fire Land, Dark Land and the valley of the Restorationists. On the spot where a small model of the Temple of Birth lay, there was a tiny flame of fire slowly moving about, washing vainly against a tiny mesh cap that covered it. Tiny green lights indicated the position of nearly four hundred of the mobile generators plus the one mighty stationary weapon.

Around the walls of the room communicator panels showed facets of the attack. Motionless operators sat before a score of positions waiting for the order to move generators through the Gateway into Kronweld or place protective meshes over break-through points.

Ketan strode at once to the map. There was no more questioning in his mind concerning his position. There would be time enough for that later. His appearance before his subordinates was of one who had been in command all his life.

He scanned the map minutely. "No additional break-through points?"

The second in command shook his head. He was an elderly second-generation Restorationist whom Ketan knew would never question Hameth's decision as to the succession of leadership. The man had only one, almost fanatical ideal, the success of the restoration.

He was Zeeter. He said, "There are no others. We have aligned no units as yet. I wanted to test our mesh against the projector. It is holding up well."

"Good. But a second attack is sure to come. We'll hold the big generator until we take the offensive, if possible. Align eight units of generators in checkered pattern across the city."

Even as he spoke, the tiny fire on the map died down and reappeared almost instantly outside the mesh. This time there was a long beam that swept and stabbed into the city. Where it touched, buildings and trees vanished in flames.

"Screen it!" Ketan shouted the command. The operator handling the mesh shifted it quickly to the new location.

In that instant the Statist projector vanished and reappeared again in another section of the city. The shielding mesh dropped about it but not before damage had been done.

"Position those units!" Ketan ordered. He whirled about to the operators controlling the positioning of the mobile units. He did not underestimate the complexity of their problem, but his training in the operation of the *Karildex* made them appear inexcusably slow in handling the few dozen factors required of them.

The sweating lead operator turned and nodded. "Units positioned."

Ketan looked back at the map. Crisscrossing the city in a checkered pattern, two hundred and forty of the mobile generators lay in wait for the next appearance of the projector. Any position in which it appeared now would place it inside a square of generators that would spray it with merciless fire.

It appeared in a moment beside the building of the *Karildex*.

Ketan gave a hoarse exclamation. The *Karildex* was the one structure he had hoped to save from damage, but now it was bathed in fire.

A mesh screen dropped over the projector and blazed white, hiding the machine from view, but in the moment it had been visible Ketan had caught just a glimpse of a featureless cylinder surmounted by a dome. Spears of violet light beamed out of focusing rings surrounding that dome.

The screen placed about the projector by means of the interplane method of transport offered partially mono-directive opposition to the radiant destruction, blocking that from the trapped projector and passing most of that trained upon it by the square of generators.

He had watched this out of the corner of his eye as it appeared on a nearby communication panel. He moved closer and dimmed the reception until he could plainly see the tessellations of the mesh and the interplay of atomic fire at the centers of the squares where the attacking beams touched from the inside.

Ketan knew that the stream of violet energy was playing against the inside of the mesh by the appearance of spots of blinding incandescence that played over the surface and came at last to a halt in a blaze that threatened to burst the mesh shield.

Ketan called to the operator handling the mesh. "Check your screen current. It's glowing into the white in several spots."

"The Eighth Unit Commander asked for a reduction. He can't get through with his beams."

"All right," Ketan assented. "Ready a second screen when this one goes."

The success of this method of defense and attack depended on the obtaining of the critical value of current that would block the projector beams but allow sufficient energy from the attacking generators to pass through and blast the projector.

To Ketan it looked as if that critical value could not be obtained. A dozen spots on the screen were glowing white. A rain of incandescent copper droplets was streaming away from the spots. It would only be a moment before the screen went.

The twelve generators forming the square about the Statist projector held their beams in a circle of flame that would sever the head of the projector if they could get through the screen without themselves being destroyed. Torrents of energy were pouring through the screen, but it was not enough.

Ketan turned his viewing screen upon the drivers of the generators. Alva was there. His lips were pressed bloodless as he watched the screen flaming and dissolving under the double impact of energy. Few moments remained before it would become a puff of volatilized copper.

With a sudden, decisive motion he shifted his own beam and trained it directly upon one of the screen's disintegrating spots, which he knew must be in line with the Statist projector.

Instantaneously, the screen vanished at that point and both beams drove through. White coruscations blasted from the hole and streamed out over the landscape, mingling with the half visible auroral curtains in the sky. For an instant, the light dimmed the twin globes in the sky.

When the normal light of day had come again, the projector was gone as was the mesh and one of the generators——Alva's. The two machines had destroyed each other simultaneously.

It was a victory, but to Ketan it was at terrible cost in the sacrifice of a man he knew and liked.

He turned away. It was time to carry the battle to the Statists. He spoke to the position operators again. "Throw Unit 9 into Danfer." He knew that other projectors would come to Kronweld but he hoped to beat them to the attack and create sufficient confusion in Danfer to hamper their operation.

The thought of the thirty generators playing their beams at random in Danfer made him more than a little sick with nausea. He wondered if it had the same effect on these others. Not ten percent of the entire colony of Restorationists were first-generation Kronweldians. There was not a single one in the Operations Center besides himself. He could not betray his weakness to them. They moved so precisely and cold-bloodedly to carry out the assignments that he doubted if they considered that men and women were being killed, blasted into living flares by the battle waging about them.

Unit 9 was moving into position now. They waited with power plants at peak potential. And then the fantastic illusion of a great doorway seemed to open beside them. It was as if a chasm swallowed them. They vanished and were in Danfer.

The setting had been off a trifle because the operators had not risked a preliminary check by opening the Gateway. The generators were within a half mile of the Statist citadel when they came through. Ketan watched them. In perfect formation they oriented themselves and drove in ponderous might towards their goal. The wheels crushed the concrete of the roads and ground it to powder with the weight of the monsters. Where they crossed sections of dirt path, they sank the depth of their thick, tapering rims.

But Ketan's eyes were upon the bystanders, the commoners of Danfer. They stood beside the road, staring at the nightmare machines that had suddenly appeared.

Some of them screamed and ran. Some stood in horror that froze all movement. Many of them would be killed by the generators.

Ketan expected that the Statists would move one or two of their projectors to the vicinity of the citadel to prevent its destruction. But not a single one of the weapons appeared.

An ominous, unrecognizable presentiment invaded Ketan.

The thirty generators ground the pavement to dust in a wide and ragged line about the structure. They held their protective screens in readiness, but no attacking beams sought them out. At a signal from the Unit commander they let go simultaneously with the full force of the belly full of atomic power plant that each of them held.

The sight was one that Ketan had tried in vain to imagine, an entire Unit with all its beams blasting at once. It seemed as if he were looking suddenly in the face of Earth's sun. The atomic forces exhibited by that mighty ring of generators were a fair match for the sun's.

He cut down the reception a thousandfold until the turrets of the generators were visible. The Director was gone now, Ketan thought. It seemed strange that it had been so easy, but the Statists had been too sure of their invincibility. Defense had never entered their plans.

Overtones of regret went through Ketan's mind. He would have liked to have seen the Director once more, to have learned something about the creature's mind.

He scaled the reception down still further to see, if pos-

sible, the ruin that was once the Statist citadel, but the screen was almost a solid rectangle of white flame.

He was about to turn away when the light dimmed as if the Unit commander had ordered a reduction of power to view the ruins himself.

Ketan looked back and it was as if he were looking through a sparkling crystal globe, gigantic, dwarfing the generators. Down the sides of that globe there washed and splashed the torrent of mortal fire from the generators still operating. Inside the sphere the Statist citadel was unharmed.

All Ketan's precepts seemed to shatter that incomprehensible vision. It was theoretically impossible that a screen could be built to withstand the force of a full Unit. But no screen was evident at all. There was nothing. Nothing but that spherical boundary beyond which the lethal radiation would not go.

He turned the view to the line of generators pouring out their mordant energies. He looked beyond—to the rows of blackened corpses that lay wilted by the reflected rays.

"Unit 10 to reinforce Unit 9," he ordered in a voice that carried across the room.

Despite their discipline, every man looked up a bare fraction of an instant. The significance of that order sent a wave of insidious, fearful doubt through them. No mesh had been built by them that was capable of standing up to the full force of a generator Unit. If the Statists had such a screen—

Unit 10 appeared in the streets, its thirty gray monsters rumbling forward to interspace themselves between those of Unit 9. As one their unendurable beams joined the others in a blaze of incandescence that forced Ketan to turn the screen away.

Over the city, half-crazed inhabitants sought refuge in the deepest cellars and behind the thickest walls. They cursed and were glad and died in the same instant, for they knew that a power had come to challenge the tyranny of their oppressors. Whether it were benevolent or a more enslaving rule they did not know or care. If it were anything less than the Statists, it would be more endurable; if more, it would only kill them more quickly.

That mighty radiation of the generators filtered through the earth and found them in their warrens. It passed through the walls and behind the wreckage of centuries that hid them. They felt it coming like a warm glow of sunshine that soothed them and warmed their burdened bodies and put

them to sleep by mercifully burning out their nerve cells before it baked their bodies to lumps of carbon.

Ketan saw them cringing and dying in the depths of the city and called a halt.

"We can't touch that screen," he called to Zeeter. "Didn't anyone have any information at all on this?"

The man shook his head and swept back his graying locks. "There was no hint of it. We thought we had developed the most powerful screens that theory indicated were feasible. What do you plan now? Hameth's outline prepared for no such possibility—if only he were here now! That he should have left at this time!"

A warning flash appeared upon the map beside them. Then another blazed forth. "Two break-through!" Ketan exclaimed. "Abandon the attack in Danfer temporarily. Watch these two projectors. I'm going to send Units 9 and 10 to the bases of these two projectors. If they are forced to return, we may be able to destroy them there."

From the previous attack, the Restorationists had gained experience in handling the sudden appearance of the projectors. But the Statists were using new tactics now. They sent the two projectors into adjacent squares formed by the generators. That meant reducing the power in each square by one eighth unless spare generators were hurried into the weak spot.

Ketan gave the order and the spot was remedied. But a swift and perilous doubting of their own invincibility swept over Ketan. Surely the mighty Igon had prepared better than this if his plans had been maturing for almost a century.

The forces were so evenly matched that it seemed that victory for either would inevitably mean the ruin of Kronweld. Ketan tried to watch the two locales of action at once on different plates. He swung another to the streets of Kronweld. The scene there was one of panic and blind hysteria. In front of the hall of the *Karildex* there milled an angry, crying mob. The outside of the building was fused into globs of metal that hung like clusters of some fantastic fruit. The roof was open to the sky and the top of the great machine projected through.

With utter illogic, streams of Seekers were pouring into the ruined building, climbing over fallen wreckage and grotesque mounds of stone and metal that had dripped from the walls and hardened. They went in and stood before the ruined keyboards, pecking frantically for some explanation

for the catastrophe. But the boards were dead, their power gone.

He swung the view to the Temple of Birth. There, more hundreds were gathered before the ruined shrine. They cried aloud to the God asking explanations and mercy. Frantic in the unanswering silence, some flung themselves across the still-powered purple line guarding the Temple's approaches.

Across the sky, smoke clouds that were not from Fire Land covered the twin globes and hid the dim sky streamers.

It was a picture of a dying city. With a fierce and mighty conviction that Igon had been wrong, Ketan cursed his name and a ruthless joy swept through him as he thought of that enfeebled brain perishing beneath the wheels of the generator. It should have died long ago.

This was no way to bring the worlds together. All the Seeking of the Restorationists and the science of Earth could have found a better way. Elta had been right in this part of her views, he acknowledged.

But now that it was begun it would only be brought to an end by greater and greater blows of death. There was no stopping, no turning back. Perhaps this would be the final end of the vast struggle that had merely paused in Richard Simons' day.

Ketan turned to the attack upon the two projectors that were in the city. They were locked in stalemate with the generators surrounding them, and they kept moving from square to square so that it was impossible to ring up sufficient power to destroy them.

Power—applied in the right place—that was what they needed. The blast of a single generator upon the unprotected surface of the projector should be able to pierce the bare metal.

He left the viewing panels and approached the lead-positioning operator.

"You were pretty far off when you set them down in Danfer. How close would you guarantee to come at considerably shorter range?"

The man answered without moving his eyes from his instruments. "The discrepancy in Danfer was due to the fact that we did not open up for a look before we shoved the generators through. If we can see where we're going, we need allow for no error whatever."

"Could you, for example, set a single machine down inside the mesh around one of those projectors out there?"

"Inside—!" The operator looked up incredulously for an

instant and then his eyes swept back to his controls. "Of course, anything you require—"

Ketan backed away under the wondering gaze of Zeeter and the others who crowded about the scale map impotent to break the stalemate. He spoke into the general communicator and addressed the drivers of the generators not yet in use.

"Two volunteers for suicide missions!" he called.

An instant response from not only all of the waiting drivers, but those already positioned in the city jammed his communicator for a moment.

"Thanks," he murmured. The thunderous response he had not expected even though he knew the fierce ambition of the Restorationists. He tried to imagine a cause for which that many Kronweldians would have offered their lives and could think of none.

For an instant he wondered if his wild scheme were worth two Restorationist lives. It had to be, he decided; if it weren't those two it might be two thousand others.

"Why don't you lift the screens and let them fight it out?" Zeeter suggested. "We aren't making any progress."

"Half the city would be wiped out before the battle was decided."

"If our generators could get in a vital blow, it would be quick."

"We'll try this first. We won't have to lift the screens if it will work." He stepped to the huge files that gave the data on every man available for combat. He looked among the generator drivers for two men with sufficiently high response and reflex indexes to do the job. He found the two highest.

"Drivers 381 and 396," he ordered. "You will be taken to the maneuver area where you are to orient your machines due north and set your beams at full intensity. We will attempt to set you inside the mesh so that your beams will be aligned with the enemy projectors. There is small chance that this alignment will be correct. You must be ready to act instantaneously before the Statist realized what has happened."

The two men understood the strategy. They understood that they must be successful or it would not be likely to succeed on a second attempt.

A position operator picked out their two machines and swung them into the barren plains far from the city. Every eye in Operations Center was upon them as their disrupted beams leaped out into the darkness ahead of them.

"Now!" Ketan commanded.

The operator touched his controls. The machines vanished from the plain.

From another vision screen a cascade of light poured into the room blinding all whose eyes were directly upon it.

The metal of one mesh instantly vanished as the projector within it was blasted by the beam of the generator that appeared beside it. The force of shattered atomic nuclei turned the attacking generator and the man within it to vapor that burned and leaped like a solar prominence towards the smoky heavens above.

The force of the blast rocked the twelve nearby generators and warped their facings. Three were turned completely over, the force of their shields the only thing that saved their drivers from being crushed.

But the second generator that appeared beside its projector created no such cataclysm. The two of them simply vanished.

Ketan leaped to another vision screen. He sensed what had happened. He focused upon the two Units he had sent to Danfer to surround the launching bases of the two projectors. At the instant the generator appeared beside the projector both machines had been carried back to Danfer—into the inferno at the focus of thirty generator beams.

In the path of the resulting holocaust was a deep crater in the earth where two generators lay warped and half buried. Eighteen of the others were thrown on their sides, their great jagged wheels still clawing the air.

A projector materialized almost instantly in their midst and began sweeping the helpless machines with its mordant beams. Unable to move their turrets the overturned generators lay in the blanket of force fields created by their screens which turned aside the attacking beams for the length of time that it would have taken to determine an even combat, then they began to go down.

The terrific energy they were absorbing warmed and then began to melt the circuits within the generators and the shields went down. One by one, the generators vanished in pools of molten fire.

The ten machines that were still upright were warped and flung away from the crater, but they lumbered forward now to give battle.

One of them was completely buried in the debris of a building through which it had crashed, and out of the pile it sent a violet beam straight to the head of the projector. The screen of the machine was hastily flung up and flamed white

in a scintillating mantle of light. It was a hurriedly created thing to defend the projector where no defense had been thought necessary, and it only partially turned aside the generator's beam.

Apparently disconcerted by the strange attack, the projector operator began sweeping the landscape with his beams. They swept into nearby buildings, sending them crashing into the street amid smoke and flame. The destroying fingers reached wildly above the city and fired the hills beyond with a long arc of flame then came back and turned the mass of rubble from which the attack came into a smoldering, molten mass that slowly dribbled and sank, exposing the generator.

Without wavering his aim upon his target, the driver moved out of the ruin, watching the Statist screen flame and grow black under his fire.

The other machines were attacking from behind, now. Their beams, like the pent-up fury of all the lost generations, sprayed the projector with death. In a ring about the head of it, they swiftly beat down the screen. In the single instant it died the projector became a miniature, radioactive lake of molten metal.

In Operations Center Zeeter put a hand on Ketan's back and gave him a warm smile of admiration. "Hameth would have liked that," he said. "With twelve generators attacking through the screen, the one inside the mesh was enough to throw the balance in our favor. That accounts for one third of their force if our information is correct."

Ketan did not respond. He knew that the destruction of the two projectors meant exactly nothing. The destruction of all six of the Statist weapons would mean little more.

It was the Statists, not their weapons, that must be destroyed. A few masses of metal reduced to gaseous or atomic forms meant nothing. The only decisive factor in this conflict would be the utter annihilation of the brains responsible for it.

And those brains were locked safely in the impenetrable citadel of the Statists.

28

"WILL YOU WANT MORE VOLUNTEERS FOR THE NEXT APpearance of the projectors?" Zeeter asked.

Ketan leaned over the map and shook his head slowly. "We won't need them. The Statists will not give us a chance to repeat that performance, you may be sure."

He turned and walked behind the long row of position operators. Back and forth they swung their Gates, searching the terrain of Earth and Kronweld for the four remaining projectors which the Statists held in reserve.

The men were nervous, Ketan thought. They had been schooled too long in the conceit of invincibility. They had thought their defeat of the Statists would be a matter of striding out and shouting "Beware the Restoration!" and every Statist in the sound of their voices would fall to the ground. Igon had not prepared them for retreat, much less for possible defeat. Perhaps, too, that was all part of the plan. Defeated, the Restorationists would have no reason for existence.

"Those four projectors have disappeared completely," the chief operator said.

"If that were true, we could stop worrying about them. Keep seaching. I—"

He was cut off by a hoarse exclamation from Zeeter who was watching a plate showing Kronweld.

"Look!"

The man was shaking violently as he pointed a finger at the plate. Ketan followed his stare.

At a point just above the ruins of the Temple of Birth, the Edge was no longer black. A spot of faint violet was glowing there, but it stood out like a blinding white glare, so great was its contrast with the lightlessness of the surrounding area.

"What have they done?" Zeeter exclaimed.

It seemed reasonably obvious to Ketan. "They have aligned a Gate right at the Edge as was the case with the one serving

the Temple. It is no doubt just big enough to admit the beam."

"But radiant energy cannot be transmitted alone through a Gate as can solid matter!"

"In that one region it apparently can. I have seen it in connection with the chamber of birth."

"We can't possibly locate the projector in that position! It could be *anywhere*—on Earth or Kronweld or on any of a thousand other planes."

"You're right. We can't." Ketan whirled and looked about him at the miniature reproduction of Kronweld. "We'll have to empty the city. Take charge of accommodating the Kronweldians here. Use the emergency police force and rescue squads for controlling them. As soon as they are here, prepare for attack. When the Statists find the city is being emptied they'll start looking for us, because they'll wonder why the defense still goes on. I give you full command at that time; I shall have other duties. Now, I want fifty men of the rescue squads at once!"

Zeeter moved to comply without question and Ketan turned back to the screen. He saw the single devastating beam sweeping slowly over the city. An attempt to screen it was made, but the beam moved constantly about and only momentary interruptions of its destruction were accomplished.

The beam swept the ruins of the Temple and turned the remnants of its walls into powder and lava. The molten rock gathered slowly in a pool that rose higher and higher, its white surface mirroring the smoke waves in the sky. It filled the depression where the building had rested and rose above the surface, forming a wall that hesitated a moment while surface tension held. Then it broke like some fearsome dam and poured out the smoking lava in a stream that cut through the garden and pathways and spread to the street where it cooled and paused, waiting until the beam should loose more substance to feed it.

The beam swept on, cutting through the stately trees and the gardens. Cremated blossoms seemed to set forth upon the air all the sweet essence of their perfume an instant before the smoke of their dying rose to help darken the sky.

Ketan watched the fabulous house of Teacher Daran melt like a house of tallow and his gardens and mud fountains turned into boiling pools and shapeless forms. The beam went on and swept the length of the long arc of roadway that passed before the Temple grounds. The plastic substance melted and flowed in a river that piled against the lava mound of congealed Temple substance, paused, then merged and

poured on in a mighty stream of fire towards Control Center.

The destruction was awesome. Its very ferocity and completeness almost stunned Ketan to immobility. He watched the slow, gathering force of the molten river, the curtain of smoke that rose and cut off so much of the light of the sky that it seemed as if both globes had set.

Ketan was roused from contemplation by the voice of the position operator. "The squad is ready."

Swiftly, Ketan spoke and gave them brief, already outlined instructions. Then the operator gathered them into the threshold of a Gate and whisked them across the vast waste of Dark Land and Fire Land into the city. One by one they were dropped into the hysterical mobs that ran through the streets in mad terror. Ketan focused on the thin-faced youngster that was dropped near the *Karildex* ruin. The fellow ran into the hall crying out to the frantic, whimpering Seekers.

"This way!" he shouted. "Run for your lives. The beam is coming this way! Run and hide!"

He ran the full length of the hall crying out at the top of his lungs. Once or twice he paused to shake or slap the face of someone so crazed with fear that he didn't seem to hear the words.

In a few moments he had the occupants of the ruin seething with mob panic and fury. He raced out the remnants of the doorway and they followed blindly not knowing or caring where they were headed, their only impulse being flight. Like the cells of some great animal they had no independent thought of their own and flowed through the streets in a unity of madness and fear.

The young Restorationist called out in a frantic voice to any they passed on the way and the mob grew like a protoplasmic mass that sucked nourishment from all life in its path.

The boy ran straight down the center of the street—into the blustery, windswept snowscape of the hidden valley.

The momentum of their flight overcame the first shocked sight of their surroundings. A cold wind whipping the drifting snow was like a flail against their bodies which were ill-protected by the scanty harness worn by most.

They halted and stared and tried to look back. But the Gateway had closed behind them. They turned and their madness focused upon the young Restorationist who stood at a distance before the open door of a building beckoning. Someone uttered a hysterical scream and their unified mob mind sent them rushing towards the doorway in a frenzy.

The scene was repeated then, twenty, fifty times—and only scattered remnants of the most hysterical still raced madly through the streets of Kronweld, or crept whimpering into some unfinding crevice to die.

Hundreds of them had died, Ketan knew, but he was determined to save all that would be saved. He sent the rescue squad back until they were more numerous than the Kronweldians upon the streets. They sought in houses and public buildings for hiding places they had not yet found. They dragged out one by one a score of screaming, terrified Seekers whose minds had shattered before the onslaught.

More than half the city was gone now. Ketan knew that it was time for him to go.

He stepped to the communicator. "Units 11, 12, and 13, and remnants of 9 and 10: Ready yourselves to attack the Statist citadel in force. Formation D, as before."

He turned to Zeeter. "Take command. I'm leaving."

"But where—?"

"I'm taking the big generator—inside."

The officer stared at him. "Not *you*—it's not necessary. There are other drivers, men who have trained long with the big machine. You are needed here."

"There's nothing to be done that you can't do now. I intend to come back, but this is my job. The Director is mine."

He stepped into a marked-off square on the floor and signaled the operator. A moment of blackness and meaningless lights, and he found himself upon the turret of the giant generator. Behind him its great bank of controls ranged in almost bewildering array.

For an instant he almost regretted his plan. It was true that many of the drivers were more skilled in the operation of the giant generator, and this was the last resort of the Restorationists.

But the plan was his and no one else could see the full implication of it as he did.

He threw the controls that set the vast atomic power units into operation far beneath the surface of the ground. More by imagination than by sound he heard the whine of their monster rotors.

He turned on the primary energizing current in the loop that arced far overhead and watched it glow into the red with the wasted power of it.

Then the panel flashed the signal from the positioning operator. The assigned Units were in place, their beams flowing

ineffectually over the invisible crystal surface that surrounded the citadel.

"Position!" he exclaimed.

Simultaneously, he threw the switches that fed the destroying power into the loops. The red glow died and his vision blacked out an instant. He found himself next in the great valley where he had seen the death of Hameth-Igon. An almost overpowering impulse to get out and search again that valley of ruin and see the ruins of that artificial body came over him.

But the operator called again. "Ready."

The terrible beam of the generator leaped out into space, potential destruction to anything in its path. In that one beam there was the power of ten Units of small mobile generators.

He waited again for the moment of blackness, and it came. He closed his eyes against it, fighting the vertigo that swept over him, and the mental fantasies of worlds and spaces. He swayed on his feet as it ended and opened his eyes.

He didn't comprehend for a moment the thing that he saw. It was too disastrous, too terrifying. But his mind forced itself to consider the phenomenon. He stared at the loop above him.

Its deadly beam had died.

He whirled to the panel behind. The power units were going at full intensity, the converters that turned the atomic energy into lethal radiance were functioning.

But there was no emission from the loops.

Outside the turret lay the Statist stronghold. Beyond, Ketan could see dimly the outlines of the massed generators whose mordant radiation sprayed the invisible sphere that now protected him. He would have been glad to see that sphere collapse if he could be sure the Director would be annihilated at the same time.

The invisible wall held.

Ketan looked back at the building. There was no sign of life or activity. The great, silent bulk of the structure could have held Kronweld's ten thousand and they hardly be noticed within it.

He turned about and switched off the useless, straining atomics and converters. He went down the companionway and through the hatch that led to the outside.

Before emerging, he buckled on a small, powerful atomic unit that fitted over his shoulders. In his hand he grasped the hand weapon that it powered.

A curious sense of instability seized him as he stepped out. It was as if the ground upon which he walked were of uncertain substance and supported him only by the grace of powerful imagination. It seemd to sink and twist like something living as he made his way towards the building.

Outside, beyond the barrier, the world was hidden by the wash of fire. It seemed curiously unreal, too, as if seen through a wall of falling water.

He came to the entrance of the building. The curious stillness was maddening. Even the terrible thunder of the generator beams impinging on substances was absent.

He entered the doorway. The corridor was dimly lighted—and empty. Weapon in hand, he advanced slowly, expecting attack at any moment. He had no recollection from his previous visit of any of the passageways through which he wound. None of the moving passageways was in operation.

He advanced up the sloping corridor and came to the next level. At the far end he saw a door that opened into a large hall. And he saw people within it.

He flattened against the wall and breathed slowly. He had come into the corridor so precipitantly that he knew he must have been seen. But no one moved to approach him.

There was something queer about the figures he could see through the open doorway. Cautiously, with weapon ready, he advanced. Then abruptly he relaxed.

The half dozen or so figures that were visible were sprawled grotesquely where they sat, or upon the floor. They were dead, all of them. He went to the doorway. There were nearly a hundred dead bodies within the room.

They were Statists. The imprint of their culture was upon their faces and in their dress. No sign of the manner of their death was evident.

There was nothing to be learned in that room of the dead and he went on through the corridor peering cautiously into empty rooms and offices and laboratories. Once more he came to a smaller hall and found another group of fifty dead, sprawling Statist bodies.

Then with a start he recognized his location. He knew this corridor. He recognized the closed door just ahead of him. He leveled his weapon with a swift, striking motion and burned the door out of its casement.

"An impetuous young man, but that is what is needed," the voice commented. It came through the air from all about him and prickled the fine hairs upon the back of his neck.

"Director!"

"*The* Director, if you please. Come closer. You need not have ruined my door. Perhaps you have hoped for this opportunity?"

"How I've waited for it," said Ketan. His voice was like a prayer. "I think that I shall be able to demonstrate now that I can kill without qualms."

He raised the weapon point-blank upon the tube that held the Director and advanced.

"Did you forget that I am shielded?" the voice inquired in soft amusement.

"Somewhere I can find a spot that will kill you. Somewhere among these circuits there is power I can cut that will let you die slowly behind your shield."

"Ah, yes, so there is," the Director sighed as if in infinite weariness. "Let us talk, first, then I shall be extremely glad to remove this shield and let you do as you wish. You are not curious as to who I am?"

"You are the Director. That is all I wish to know."

"I have a friend here whom you might care to meet before you do away with me."

Instinctively, Ketan twisted his head about to scan the walls on either side. At his left a door opened suddenly and through it walked a man.

Ketan's hand almost dropped the weapon. His throat gasped a single word.

"Hameth!"

The trunk-clad figure strode forward with outstretched hand, his bronze body seeming to warm the entire room. But when he neared, Ketan was looking through him.

A second figure had stepped out of the doorway and behind it a third. Each was an exact duplicate of the first. Three Hameths.

"Where—?" Ketan began hoarsely.

The figures were duplicates except in one feature. Each was a dozen years younger in appearance than the previous one.

"Quite good, aren't they?" said the voice of the Director.

Ketan didn't answer. His mind was searching for answers, and the only one he could seize upon was the most incredible of all.

"Do you understand now?" said the voice of the Director. "You saw the wreckage of Hameth under the wheels of your generator.

"I made him. I spoke through him. I influenced you and

led the Restorationists through him. Do you understand what that means?"

Ketan's mind was a battleground of conflicting thoughts and emotions, but one incredible reality emerged victorious. "Igon."

After a time the voice spoke again. "Could you imagine a better hiding place—or a more effective one?"

"I don't understand," Ketan said weakly. "Your extermination of the Illegitimates—the destruction of Kronweld—"

"Was a lot less murderous than it would have been with another in my place. In a thousand ways I have lessened the hardships of the Illegitimates and of the commoners of our cities. I have postponed and prevented the destruction of the Kronweldians.

"Why do you think I allowed Elta to destroy the Selector? Did you think that the Statists were so ineffective or so foolish that they could not detect and stop her plan if necessary? I had to let her destroy the Selector because you were not ready. The Restorationists were not ready to withstand attack."

"What did you do with her?"

"She is at the pinnacle with her father, Javins, and William Douglas. They are prisoners of Bocknor who is directing the attack against Kronweld."

"Elta—alive!" A stinging moistness came to Ketan's eyes, a blinding film that blotted out the mummied figure in the tube, and a prayer of thanks in his heart.

"How can I get to her?"

"She is safe for the moment. There are many things I must tell you, Ketan. I shall not live much longer. Minutes, perhaps. I have hung on these past months by sheer desire to see my work finished and you in my place."

"How could I ever take your place?" Ketan spoke humbly.

"There are a good many reasons why you should. First of all because my inheritance is in you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your father was my son."

Ketan's face went white. "My father—you can tell me where he is—and mother—"

"No. They were killed in the same blast that made me less than half a man. They were part of our group and they knew what I planned for you before they died."

"I—wish that I had known them. But—" Ketan looked at the shriveled figure. A strange and baffling emotion swept through him. "I have known you. That is a great deal."

"I am glad to hear you say it. I wondered if the common emotions of family relationship would ever touch you. Your mother feared greatly that they would not, but she gave you up."

"Tell me what your plans were. I feel that so much has happened to me which was not of my own volition."

"That is true, but I think you will finally agree that I have denied you nothing that I have not replaced with something better.

"It began with my desire to see one of my own complete the work I had begun. I knew that I would never live long enough to see it through.

"Because I was already in the position of Director, I had the opportunity of examining you at birth and seeing the record of your potentialities. For the most part they were what I needed. I knew that you could be the one to bring back Richard Simons' lost people. Your father and mother finally gave their consent and I sent you through the Selector to spend your first years in Kronweld.

"I knew that you would be automatically selected as I was by the special circuits and impressed to return to Earth. During those years I was the only one who knew who you were. I even kept it from your grandmother, Matra.

"She was furious with me, but I didn't dare let anyone else know your identity. Finally, she discovered you for herself and tried to involve you in plans of her own. I had commissioned her to control the flow of information through the Temple, but Hoult and Daran became too much for her. She determined to do away with them somehow and when she found you she determined that you could help her. She did not know of Elta's gradually changing heart, of course, and included her in that condemnation."

Ketan let his mind drift back to that night when he had been present at the death of the ancient in the Temple of Birth. Something of the strange affinity he had felt for her then came back to him now. He wondered if it were because of her relationship to him. He wished he had known then who she was.

"I watched you all those years," Igon said. "I led you and guided you. I sent special envoys at times to bend you the way I wanted you to go. Branen of the Unregistereds was one. But you must not think I tried to force you into a pattern where you were not using your own initiative. Just the opposite. I merely supplied specific stimuli to bring out the qualities of initiative that were necessary for you to develop."

Ketan thought back to Branen, the loyal friend he had known. A thousand little incidents fell into place and were explained where they had been annoying puzzles before.

"So that's why Branen so gently but insistently pushed me on. I could never understand him. He was so self-effacing, but he was like a shadow following me and building up my own ego when I doubted myself. Even in his attempted dissuasion when I was determined to go before the Council I think he was actually goading me on."

"Of course he was," said Igon. "That's what I sent him there to do. There were others of the Restorationists among the Unregistereds who did the same for you. They watched and taught you and reported to me.

"When the time was right for you to go back, I intended that one of the Hameths as Varano should go with you. I didn't want you to dream up some fantastic scheme based on half information as did some of the others who came through. Two of them became so fanatical that I had to kill them. It was the impact of the knowledge that the pinnacle revealed. Their minds were not strong enough to evaluate it properly in spite of the fact that they were brought back through the Selectör.

"You did very well in your objective evaluation of the facts you were given. Your weakness was that you underestimated the complexity of the Kronweldians' reactions by standardizing your own, but that was a natural mistake in view of your background. Elta came to a better evaluation there than did you because she had more facts to base her decision on. But she failed utterly until very recently to understand the goal or motive of Richard Simons and his group.

"You got along very well without Varano's help so that it was unnecessary for me to intervene further except to send you back to Kronweld and to the Restorationists."

"I don't understand one thing," said Ketan. "If Varano was merely one of the Hameths, a machine, why did he react to my blow on his jaw, and to the injection I gave him?"

"I had to make him act naturally. To have revealed him then as a machine would have threatened your own self-assertion which had reached a delicate balance at that point. It would have crumbled if you had known the truth."

Ketan gazed upon his grandfather with almost a sense of resentment. "You've pretty well controlled me so far, but we can't remain here talking. A war is being fought and a

hundred generators are attacking this building. Our talk must wait."

"There is time," the old man said. "And don't resent what I have done, Ketan. Think a moment and you will understand. You comprehend the ideal of Richard Simons and therefore you know that any measure necessary to carry it out was justified.

"But after growing in Kronweld you were like a plant reared in artificial environment. You had to be taught and your mind prepared very carefully for each step that was to come. I led you to William Douglas who was best qualified to show you the Illegitimates and their conflict. I led you back to Kronweld that you might understand how they would react to the truths you had to tell them. Now you know their reaction and you shall be able to deal with them.

"I haven't tried or desired to control you. I have taught you. This is about the end of it for me. It's yours from here out. This building, as you may have guessed, is removed a trifle from the plane of Earth. That renders your beams inoperative in this space. The dead Statists you may have seen below are some of the leaders I called here for safety when you began your attack. I destroyed them to assist in your task, but there are thousands of others who will still fight and must be overcome.

"The most dangerous of all is Bocknor. If he knows he's defeated, he will attempt to destroy the pinnacle and the gauge and cut you off forever. You could duplicate the gauge setting only in a thousand years of trial and error."

"I must get back!"

"There is time. I want to know before you go: What are your plans? How will you govern?"

"Plans? They'll have to be your plans, not mine. I had plans, but they were impetuous and ill-thought out. I'll carry out your plan for teaching and orienting the Kronweldians. There'll be chaos for a long time, but with communication and transportation—"

He stopped suddenly as if all his thoughts and all the events that had transpired had led to the abrupt, mountainous barricade of Igon's last question. Elta had asked it, but he hadn't known then what it implied.

"Govern?"

He spoke the word against the backdrop of the scene in his mind. A scene of Earth's millions of ignorant and repressed peoples who would be thrown into an exuberant chaos at their release from the Statist tyranny. They were the

hundreds of thousands of barbarous, impulsive Illegitimates. And Kronweld's handful of dazed and bewildered and shocked Seekers. He understood then what Elta had meant.

He shut the scent out of his mind and closed his senses to the complexity of the problem before it blinded him to its simplicities.

"We won't try to govern them," he said at last. "We'll let them govern themselves. That's the way that's always been best. That's the way it's got to be. We won't govern; we'll teach. For a while we shall have to administer, but we'll give it over to them in the end.

"And we'll give them the *Karildex*. That will be our gift to them, and in the end it may prove to be the one thing that will bring about the realization of Richard Simons' dream. All the old governments failed when their attempts at representative rule collapsed because of their complexities and the patent impossibilities inherent in the idea of a billion people sitting down together and making their own laws.

"The *Karildex* removes all those impossibilities. The desires and wishes of the most remote member of such a society will not be overlooked in lawmaking with the use of the *Karildex*. I wonder why the old civilization never saw that it would take a machine to make their government function as they desired."

"I wondered if you'd see it," said Igon solemnly. "The whole contribution of Kronweld to civilization consists of the *Karildex* and your means of government. It is justification enough for Richard Simons' entire experiment. He proved that minds of the type he selected could not concern themselves with the pettiness of government by politics; they removed the problem as quickly as possible and set up a means of control that was almost automatic in its function.

"The weakness of Kronweld, that almost succeeded in destroying it, was a common weakness of man, susceptibility to superstition. Superstition's only remedy is knowledge. You tried to give them that. Sometimes education has to be administered violently as is now being done. There was no other way. Kronweld was slowly rotting from its intellectual inbreeding. It had passed its apex of civilization.

"There is one thing above all that you must teach the people. Teach them to build and use and revere machines. The machine is the mark that sets man apart from the animals. It is the expression of his intelligence, but intelligence without expression is only a vapor. In the Second Dark Age man became afraid of the machine and vowed to live without it and so he became no more than the beasts, unable to travel

faster than his legs would allow, or to speak any farther than the sound of his voice would carry.

"Teach the people to build and dream of greater and greater machines until they can reach the stars. The machine is man's poetry and his music and all his art. Never forget that fact.

"Never make the mistake the antimaterialists made."

"I won't," Ketan promised solemnly.

After a time he said, "What of us, now? You are coming back with me. You must speak to the Kronweldians, tell them of your work."

"No . . . no, they must look to you. I shall remain a legend as the great iconoclast of Kronweld. I'll send you back now, to the pinnacle. I'll return your machine to the valley in Dark Land. You must go to the pinnacle and deal with Bocknor. Then after you are gone I shall go on a little farther. There is a plane where death is very quick and quite sweet.

"Good-bye, Ketan, son of my son."

29

WITH THE WORDS STILL IN HIS EARS, BLACKNESS COVERED HIS vision and Ketan was alone in his disembodiment, soaring through space and time. There was only one conscious thought in that epoch of transversal. The image of that half human figure of Igon, the knowledge that he had found a living ancestor.

He thought for a time that he was in the forest of Kyab where he had first awakened. There were trees rocking slowly against the distant sky and clouds floating at their tips.

He sat up sharply trying to think. This was not the same. Deep beds of flowers covered the earth and almost overpowered the senses with their perfume. Then he heard a voice.

"We have been waiting for you. Igon said you would come."

He jerked his head about and looked up. It was Dorien, the First Woman.

"Where is she?" he demanded almost harshly. "Where is Elta?"

"Elta is safe. She is imprisoned with her father and William

Douglas. There are other Statists here, but Igon told us to wait until you came before destroying them."

"Igon is dead."

"I know. He said that you would take his place and we should work with you."

"Can you destroy the Statists?"

"We prepared ourselves to prevent the entry of any unauthorized persons. We have allowed these to come, but we can take care of them."

"Then I'll help—"

"There is nothing you can do. Watch."

The image of the girl passed gracefully between the trees and through the flowers, her dark hair like some exquisite blossom moving with the gentle breeze.

Then Ketan saw the man through the trees in the far distance. He was a Statist, armed and arrogant.

Ketan rose to follow Dorien. He should have asked her the way to Bocknor. Somewhere within the pinnacle the Statist was guiding the attack upon Kronweld. Fear was high within Ketan over the outcome of the battle. Igon had seemed so calm as if it were already decided, but Ketan knew the Restorationists could yet lose, miserably and calamitously. He wondered if the attack upon the valley had begun, or if Bocknor had not been able to locate it.

Screening himself in the forest, he tried to catch Dorien, but he could not even keep pace. Then he saw her close to the distant Statist. The man had lowered his weapon and was putting his arms around her. Ketan stared uncomprehendingly.

At that moment a tremendous flame of light blinded him. Its fire and the blast of it flung him backwards. He threw an arm before his eyes to blot it out. When he could at last see again, Dorien was returning and the Statist was nowhere to be seen.

Then he understood what had happened, and a cold, trembling wave went through him at the thought of what might have happened if they had not properly identified him when he fell through the excavation into the pinnacle the first time. The power that was dormant in those images—

"Take me to Bocknor—and Elta," he said.

"You must be careful. There are many Statists—"

They went up the familiar trail and broke into the marble hall. A Statist was waiting for them there.

He raised his weapon instantly towards Ketan. Ketan's

own was leveled, but he was slower. The Statist pressed the trigger and a blossom of fire burst into the air.

Dorien caught it. She leaped in front of Ketan as his own weapon sprayed her back with a cloak of livid radiance. But she was still running with outstretched arms towards the gasping, staring Statist.

The man fired again and again, and the beams sprayed over her figure in an aura of terrible light. Then she was upon him, her arms clinging tightly about him.

Ketan whirled and buried his face against his arms, but the radiance she unleashed penetrated the blackness as if through his very flesh.

He turned back. She was walking towards him with a smile on her lips.

They wound upwards through the pinnacle's passageways. No more Statists were in evidence, but they kept a sharp watch for any such. When they reached the end, Ketan realized all his care was worth little beside the probably automatic detection which told Dorien of the presence of anyone near.

They came to a high vaulted entrance blocked by a closed door.

Dorien hesitated. "My power will be dangerous to the others if I use it full strength in there."

"Wait until I ask it then," said Ketan. "I don't think it will be necessary."

He opened the door.

The scene before was like a collection of wax images.

Two Statist operators whirled from their panels on his left. Ahead of him, the corpulent Bocknor stood openmouthed. Beyond, in a small alcove, Elta and Javins and William Douglas were bound upright against the wall.

Bocknor's hand was on his weapon. "How did you get in here?"

"I came from the Director. He can't get through to you. He wants to know what is wrong."

"There's nothing wrong here! This is a trick. I'll—"

"Why don't you call the Director, first?"

"Call him!" Bocknor ordered an operator. Then to Ketan. "I don't know how you found us here except by guess, but all the tricks in the world won't do you any good now. Look at your city. How do you like it?"

He swung a hand towards the screen where the burning city could be seen. It was almost entirely gone now. Only a molten lake was recognizable as far out as the farming lands.

At that moment, Elta caught sight of Ketan for the first time and her voice rang out with recognition. "Ketan!"

She could not see Bocknor. Ketan struggled with all his power to keep from answering her cry, but he kept his eyes on Bocknor.

The operator was having trouble with the equipment. Ketan supposed he was not completely familiar with it yet. He finally got the scene—the scene where the Statist citadel had stood. There was only a hemispherical depression in the ground, as deep as the building had been high.

Bocknor gasped and swore. His mental reflexes functioned slowly and only succeeded in bringing contortions to his fat countenance. His alertness vanished and Ketan leaped.

He seized Bocknor's gun arm and twisted with all his strength. It took every erg of it to force the thick, short arm around and break the wrist hold on the weapon. Like many fat men, Bocknor was deceptively muscled.

The gun dropped to the floor and spun away from them. Ketan kept on twisting, then suddenly flung his entire weight to one side. Bocknor slammed to the floor.

Ketan's foot struck a smooth spot as they fell and he landed on his back almost beside the Statist leader.

The two operators had risen from their feet and one of them jumped. He landed on Ketan's outstretched wrist. Through the sudden pain waves Ketan saw the other foot raised to smash into his face. He waited until the foot was in the air and jerked aside.

Bocknor lay heavily, struggling for breath that had been knocked out by his fall. As the operator's foot landed in the space where Ketan's head had been, Ketan grabbled his leg and twisted, rising at the same time. The men fell headlong, Ketan's other knee plunging into Bocknor's midriff.

The second operator had picked up the gun by now and waited calmly as Ketan arose. He pointed the weapon directly at Ketan's back. Sensing, rather than seeing it, Ketan whirled. But he was too late. The finger was already depressing the button.

At that moment Dorien came up behind the Statist. She did not approach too closely or reach out to touch him. She stood behind him as if trying to gauge her distance carefully. Her figure became inclosed in a halo of golden light.

That halo touched the Statist operator. The smell of burned flesh filled the air, and his back arced as if he had been struck. He crumpled to the floor.

The other operator had witnessed the scene. He had risen

to one knee and remained petrified with terror for Dorien had not stopped. The golden glow still surrounded her and she was advancing towards him.

He gave a fearsome scream as he backed into the corner.

"No!" Ketan cried. "I can take care of these two. I want—"

But Dorien's hand had touched the man. His long scream of pain echoed in the chamber and then his blackened corpse collapsed.

Bocknor cringed against the floor. Dorien was looking down at him. "They have despoiled our repository," she said. Her voice was bitter.

"Give me this one," Ketan demanded. "He has done worse to Kronweld. He has changed it to his own pattern. He should live there!"

"Do as you wish." The golden halo died.

Bocknor was rising to his feet, shaking with fear and swinging his fists. But there was no danger left in him. He sagged as Ketan plunged a fist into his face.

He was half conscious, but Ketan dragged him to a point in the center of the floor. Then, after examining the control panel a moment, he adjusted a couple of controls. Instantly, a section of the hell-world of Kronweld opened beside him. He adjusted it to the edge of Fire Land where the beam spewing out of the Edge had not yet touched. He pressed a button. Bocknor was no longer in the room. He was lying on the radioactive sands at the border of Fire Land.

Ketan closed the scene and went into the alcove. Swiftly, he cut the bonds from the three prisoners. His arms went about Elta and tears flooded over the ledges of her eyelids. Ketan felt their wetness upon his own face.

Javins and William Douglas greeted him warmly.

"We didn't know whether we were ever going to see you again or not," said William Douglas. "We thought Bocknor had come out on top for sure."

"Not while Igon was running things," Ketan smiled. "He never lost control."

"He's gone?" asked Javins.

Ketan nodded.

"Igon was the Director?" Elta asked unsteadily. "I don't understand—"

"There is a lot to tell you yet, but we haven't won the fight. I've got to call Zeeter."

He returned to the chamber and called the Operations Center and the commander.

"Ketan," the old leader acknowledged. "We thought you were gone."

"Never mind. Tell me how it stands."

"Kronweld's gone. I suppose you know. But that isn't all. The Edge is breaking down and Fire Land is erupting like never before. It looks as if the whole land is breaking up!"

"Just a minute. Let me look. I'll contact you again."

Ketan swung the view away from the Center and swept it back towards Kronweld.

Outside the valley the view swept along the snow-covered peaks and valleys and down to the barren plains. Ketan suppressed an exclamation. Vast chasms were opening in the ground, great cracks that stretched for endless distances across the bleak plain. As he swept along he saw a herd of Bors running madly from the thunderous opening of the ground. A chasm suddenly burst open before them and they plunged on, screaming and bellowing, into the depths.

Farther on, a great storm lashed the sky and sent bursts of lightning against the plain. Spouts of smoke and flame were opening up far from the boundaries of Fire Land.

He sped on to Fire Land itself. The great molten lake he had crossed with Varano was a seething inferno, hurling waves of lava far beyond its shores. A new volcano threw puffs at the sky, puffs that contained chunks of half solid rock as big as a building.

Flames of radioactive radiation darted across the length and breadth of the Land. The death fire of incalculable numbers of atoms scintillated in a continuous auroral glow that leaped and touched the sky and flung itself back to the rocks and fires, only to burst forth again in a mad, unending oscilliation.

Ketan felt moisture upon his brow and rivulets of it running down his face as he watched the dying world.

"The entire land is breaking up," Elta said sadly. "The radiations of the generators and projectors must have set it off."

Ketan brought the view still farther back until he was at the boundary where Fire Land met the Edge. The sight that met his eyes almost forced him to look away from the awful terror and sheer beauty of it.

The very Edge itself seemed to be aflame.

A curtain of fire reached to infinity above and beyond on either side of Kronweld. The thing was like an infinite falls of flaming liquid. The flames rippled through the spectrum from voilet and blue through the scale into deep and terrible

reds that tumbled and sped ever downward into the lake of lava below.

In a moment of infinite regret, Ketan knew that now he would never understand the secrets of the Edge.

He turned away and cried out to the Illegitimate. "William Douglas! We've got to bring them here. Can the Illegitimates take care of them?"

"You mean all of the valley?

"Take them to Danfer," Javins burst in. "They can't go to the primitive villages of the Illegitimates."

Ketan pressed his lips in a thin line. "There are nearly twenty thousand of them. We'll bring the Restorationists to the city. You will direct their resettlement, Javins. The Kronweldians we will send to the villages. Are they capable of taking care of so many?"

William Douglas nodded. "Almost. I had nearly completed my work of organization. I wonder if Igon anticipated—"

"You will direct their resettlement there, then. I'll get some position operators from the valley and you can use one panel to communicate with the separate villages."

"Why not the city?" Javins pleaded.

"This is better," Ketan said. But in his mind he was thinking of that first day when he walked along the streets of the village among the Illegitimates. He was thinking of those firm, defiant faces and the inspiration that had been upon him then—if only they could mingle with Kronweld and learn and teach with them.

There would be conflict, he knew. But out of it would come understanding and the leaders who must assist him. The Illegitimate villages would become cities and the cities would become the nuclei of the new civilization.

In time, when they had learned of their heritage and the new world, the Kronweldians would slowly filter up to their places at the top, but it would be after they had earned it.

Ketan went back to Zeeter. "We will transfer everyone as rapidly as possible. Gather the Kronweldians a hundred in a group and we will bring them through. We will control their positioning from here. At the same time you send the Restorationists, as many as possible at a time, to Danfer. Abandon everything. There is not time to transfer anything but the population."

Zeeter looked stunned for an instant as if unable to comprehend the magnitude of the catastrophe, then he spoke crisply and firmly. "I'll give the orders."

Technicians came from the valley and swarmed through the pinnacle. Those who were there for the first time stifled their amazement and curiosity and worked in a frenzy under the direction of Richard Simons and Dorien and Ketan.

From the vast stock of machines and materials in the pinnacle they produced a mesh to protect the entire rock for there were yet three and possibly four Statist projectors at large. There would be no safety until they were hunted down and destroyed. Under the command of Zeeter, the generators that had been in Danfer were stationed in protective formation, ready to attack the moment one of the enemy machines should appear.

There were many hundreds of Statists yet to be accounted for. The emergency police guard of the Restorationists was given the task of seeking them out and eliminating their menace.

Standing behind the position operators, Ketan and Elta watched the swift transfer of the Kronweldians to the villages. Nearly a thousand trained administrators from the Restorationists were assisting in the gigantic task and William Douglas was capably directing the entire operation.

"There's some of the Council," said Ketan. "It's Anot and Nabah. I wonder what they think now of their tight little world where they knew almost everything there was to know?"

"It's the end for them," said Elta slowly. "Their world has shattered and they have died with it. Such minds as theirs would have become closed and dogmatic in any environment. But only a few in Kronweld were as intractable as they. With the wiping out of superstitions, new knowledge will flood into most of the minds and you will have the leaders and teachers of which Richard Simons dreamed. I see it now."

"Igon told me you had gained an understanding. I hope it was true."

By the time the last group was transferred the entire world of Kronweld was a mass of flame from the Edge of the valley of the Restorationists. Flames burst out of the ground and engulfed the great Operations Center. Its needle spire tipped crazily and hung a moment in the sky as if reluctant to give up its commanding position. Then it crashed and lava sucked it into itself with molten, savage lips.

Ketan turned off the scene and closed the Gateway. He went behind the panel for a moment and shifted the setting of the gauge.

He stole a moment then with Elta and they went down

into the eternal gardens of the pinnacle where soft clouds like balls of white cotton were brushing the sky.

Conscience-guilty, Ketan knew that he must not remain here, that the task of the Restoration had only begun, but just for a moment—

Elta turned her face up to his and he saw worry and fear lining her brow. "What—"

"Ketan, why did you have to rebel at wearing the day cloak in Kronweld? Oh, why couldn't you have conformed in just one thing?"

He smiled. "That was when I first went to the House of Wisdom. I had to have *something* to rebel about, but I never did go without it for long. It was too uncomfortable."

Elta's eyes shone suddenly as if a burst of sunlight had fallen upon her face. "You mean there is a chance for us then, like the rest of them?"

Ketan's mind went back to that night in a dark cave in the Kyab and he thought of Mary and William Douglas. "I'm sure there is," he said, "if that's what you want." A tremor went through him and all the old fears and tight, mind-inclosing walls came back.

It was the unnatural man of Kronweld that Hameth—or Igon—had warned him against and Ketan tried to shake him off.

"More than anything else in the world," Elta said. She drew close and laid her head against his shoulder. "I want it more than anything else."

Ketan turned her face up to his and his eyes responded to the glow in hers.

"I'm sure you'll get what you want," he said. "I'm very sure of it."

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Like all my companions in Kronweld I emerged full-grown from the Temple of Birth. My needs, my wishes, my passions were coldly filed in the perforated transparencies that constitute the integrated will of Kronweld.

But I alone harbor curiosity about our past. I alone know the Bors of Dark Land and how they are born. I alone have discovered the hidden secret of our birth...and have heard the groaning fertility prisoners of the other world. Here is their message:

"If any of you live, come through to us. Save us. Bring weapons!"

I am going to them now. I do not know whether I will ever return from the great Edge...

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